

RHODE ISLAND WOODLAND PARTNERSHIP

Preventing The Loss of Rhode Island's Forests

The Issue

Rhode Island's forestlands are being lost to residential, commercial, and other non-forest land uses at an alarming rate. The extent of forests in Rhode Island decreased by approximately 10,000 acres between 1998 and 2007.¹ This has resulted in our forests being fragmented into smaller, disconnected tracts with the subsequent loss of important economic and community benefits that Rhode Island forests provide. Rhode Island is losing forest land more rapidly than any state, with about 48% of forestland outside of RI's urban areas in 2000 projected to be subsumed by urban growth by the year 2050.²

Forests in RI decreased by approximately 10,000 acres between 1998 and 2007....with the subsequent loss of important economic and community benefits...

Preventing Forest Loss

Preventing the loss and fragmentation of Rhode Island's forestland is critical for protecting clean and safe drinking water.

The Rhode Island Woodland Partnership (RIWP) believes that preventing the loss and fragmentation of Rhode Island's forestland is a critical aspect of protecting the natural resources - especially good clean drinking water - and, the social and economic values of Rhode Island. We encourage and promote the protection of the remaining intact forest cover in Rhode Island through the application of policies that discourage further forest fragmentation and encourage development patterns that conserve the landscape values of larger, unbroken tracts of land.

Actions

Specific actions to protect our remaining forest acreage from loss and fragmentation by poorly-planned and poorly-sited development should include:

Take a leadership role: No state or local policy should result in and/or encourage the loss of forest land. State Guide Plans (listed under References that follow) and Town Comprehensive Plans have been developed and must be followed by state law;

Promote Smart Growth Land Use: Smart growth land use techniques such as the Transfer of Development Rights, Conservation Development, Village Zoning and the use of Low Impact Development can all help to accommodate development while preserving forest land;

Support Forestland Conservation: Encourage bond initiatives that are needed to meet the match requirements for State and Federal programs to cost share purchasing the development rights to forest land; and,

Support the Farm, Forest & Open Space Act: Encourage the application of recommended current-use values as a tool to conserve forest land and prevent its conversion to more intensive land uses.

¹ Butler et al., 2011

² Nowak & Walton, 2005

Additional Actions Recommended by the RIWP:

At the State Level

- **Forestland Stewardship:** Increase funding for land owner education and technical assistance through RI DEM's Divisions of Forest Environment and Fish and Wildlife along with the URI Cooperative Extension Service, which are charged with managing state-owned forests and supporting private landowner conservation activities;
- **Forest Based Business:** Forest products contribute an estimated \$710 million annually to the Rhode Island economy and support over 3,300 jobs. Recognize and integrate the economic value of Rhode Island's forest products into State economic development policies and programs, encourage the greater use of our unique locally grown forest products to lessen our dependence on fossil fuels, increase forest productivity, and create local jobs through the sustainable management of our forests;
- **Incentives to Retain Forest Land:** Encourage the use of local forest products to encourage land owners to maintain and properly manage their woodlands.
- **Good Forest Management:** State forest lands should be used to demonstrate how trees can be properly harvested to sustain a healthy forest and maximize forest functions and values. Increase educational support to private woodland owners, who own 75% of the forested area in Rhode Island;
- **Forest Management and Climate Change:** Climate change policies and actions should recognize the role that forests play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, moderating temperatures, storing carbon, helping to manage stormwater, moderate streamflow and prevent flooding from major storm events.

At the Municipal Level

- **Local Planning:** Community comprehensive plans should identify and map prime forest lands and include land use policies that encourage no net loss and prevent the fragmentation of these forest lands.
- **Forest Business Friendly Zoning:** Zoning should be amended to allow forest land owners to establish eco-friendly accessory business uses on their land to reduce development pressure and maintain forest values.

RIWP members include:

Audubon Society of Rhode Island

Burrillville Land Trust

Grow Smart Rhode Island

Northern RI Conservation District

RI Chapter of the Society of American Foresters

RI Forest Conservators Organization, Inc. (RIFCO)

RI Land Trust Council

RI Natural History Survey

RI Resource Conservation and Development Council

RI Tree Council

The Forest Stewards Guild

Rhode Island forests background

Rhode Island is 56% forested despite being the second most densely populated state in the country. Forest products contribute an estimated \$710 million annually to the Rhode Island economy and support over 3,300 jobs. Moreover 75% of Rhode Islanders get clean and safe drinking water from reservoirs protected by forests. Rhode Island's clean and safe drinking water supply is a competitive advantage in attracting new businesses and maintaining those that exist. The state's forests also play a critical role in mitigating the effects of a changing climate by storing carbon, moderating air temperatures, and reducing air pollution. Rhode Island forests also:

- Improve air quality, through pollutant filtration and release of oxygen;
- Support numerous recreational, tourism, fishing and hunting opportunities;
- Reduce flooding by absorbing and retaining rain water;
- Provide wildlife habitat;
- Produce renewable resources that are the basis for many products and services; and,
- Add immeasurably to our quality of life and the character of rural Rhode Island.

The continuation of these vitally important values is not guaranteed. Seventy-two percent (72%) of our forests are privately owned, and as forests are fragmented into smaller parcels by development, the value to harvest timber products, clean water protection, recreational use and wildlife habitat is greatly reduced.

In addition to declines in overall area of forest cover, our forests are being fragmented at an alarming rate as the construction of roads, subdivisions and other human development break up large and contiguous blocks of forest into an increasing number of smaller blocks. For example, a URI study of forest fragmentation reported that between 1972 and 1999 the number of forest blocks increased by 78% while the average area of the blocks decreased by 47%.³ Forest fragmentation has many negative impacts, including the loss of sensitive plant and animal species, increased vulnerability to invasive species, and disrupted hydrology.

Despite the heavily urban and sub-urban landscape of Rhode Island, its western forests are part of the Southern New England Heritage Forest and they play a critical role in providing all of those benefits described herein. Responsible management can ensure that Rhode Island's forests sustain these values while helping ease the transition to a warming climate with changing weather patterns.

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THE RHODE ISLAND WOODLAND PARTNERSHIP

Mission

Established in 2013, the Rhode Island Woodland Partnership is a collaborative effort amongst foresters, landowners, conservationists, scientists, and woodland professionals who represent rural landowners, small businesses, non-profits, public agencies, and higher education organizations. The Partnership works to increase the impact of forest conservation efforts in Rhode Island through coordination and information sharing among partners.

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<http://rhodeislandwoods.uri.edu/ri-woodland-partnership/>