March 8, 2018 Testimony of Scott Millar
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Submitted to House Environment and Natural Resources Committee
House Bill H-7793

Grow Smart RI supports the goal of achieving 1,000 MW of renewable energy by 2020. We believe it is critical for RI to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels to help mitigate the effects of climate change. But how we work to achieve this goal is as important as reaching the goal itself.

One of the unintended consequences of siting large scale utility renewable energy development has been the clear cutting of forests. RI grown wood products contribute over $700 million annually to the State’s economy and support over 3,000 jobs. In addition to the critical values for supplying drinking water, habitat and recreation, the forest also can help to mitigate climate change. The Nature Conservancy, in conjunction with 14 other science based organizations, determined that the forest is the most economical means to mitigate climate change because of its ability to absorb and store carbon. RI forests can attenuate the annual carbon emissions of approximately 6 million automobiles. Therefore if the ultimate goal is to reduce the negative effects of climate change, RI must pursue renewable energy development in a way that minimizes the continued loss of forest.

Grow Smart RI believes that the State must establish appropriate economic incentives to encourage the subsequent siting of renewable energy in developed and disturbed locations such as landfills, brownfields, rooftops, parking lot canopies, and gravel banks. Massachusetts and Vermont have already established such economic incentives and CT is in the process of doing so.

House bill H-7793 is a good first step toward a greener RI renewable energy siting program. Section 1 (g) requires the Office of Energy Resources to evaluate existing State laws and policies to identify economic and other incentives to encourage subsequent renewable energy development in more appropriate locations. We believe this is the most important section of this bill and the only section we can support. If the current renewable energy siting incentives are not changed, the remainder of this bill will accelerate the loss of RI’s farms and forests.

We also respectfully request that the following language be revised:

Section 1 (c) (2) that currently reads "do not unreasonably deny constituents access to State renewable energy programs" should be deleted. This language is too broad and could be interpreted to negate local land use authority. We suggest this language be changed to read ... law, programs and the renewable energy siting guidance and model ordinances established by Section 1 (f).

In Section 1 (f) delete “reducing renewable project costs” and replace with reasonable best management practices for siting renewable energy. If the primary objective of developing renewable energy siting guidance is reducing costs, then that will continue to encourage subsequent renewable energy to be sited in greenfields rather than in developed or disturbed locations. Moreover, municipalities must adopt reasonable and cost effective standards but not be constrained by adopting the lowest cost standards.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.