

To: Kate Sayles, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Land Trust Council
From: Serena Russell, Clean energy and forest conservation policy researcher; Audubon Society of Rhode Island
Date: November 8, 2023
Subject: Utilizing federal funding for forest conservation in Rhode Island

The Biden Administration has delivered the most progressive agenda the US has ever seen in terms of climate, clean energy and conservation. Biden's 30X30 rule¹, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law², and the Inflation Reduction Act³ are just a few examples of the significant investment and prioritization of environmental efforts which increase protection of current and future generations. Throughout this administrative refocus, abundant federal funding has been made available to states in order to advance their own policies, plans, and programs related to these focus areas.

Throughout Rhode Island's sustainable transition, various pathways have been explored in order to reach state climate goals. Resilient Rhody⁴, the 2016 Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan⁵, 2022 Climate Update⁶, and the in-progress 2025 Climate Action Strategy⁷, all detail efforts the state can take in order to reach climate goals and mitigate effects of global warming. Historically, these reports undervalue the benefits of forest conservation, the ability of forests to help accomplish state goals, and the role they play in maintaining a healthy environment.

This memo is ultimately driven by *The Forest Values Report*, co-authored by Kate Sayles, the Executive Director of the Rhode Island Land Trust Council, and Christopher Riely, forestry specialist and research associate at URI, which discusses the vast benefits of forest conservation in relation to climate change, wildlife habitat, and human health⁸. Rhode Island is 54% forested, while being the second most densely populated state in the nation. The state's forests continue to be under increasing threat of fragmentation, predominately due to development. It's imperative that Rhode Island takes advantage of this progressive atmosphere, and understands how to utilize federal funding in order to advance sustainable initiatives, while incorporating the protection of forests. This memo discusses four strategies employed primarily in neighboring states, aimed at strengthening forest protection and ensuring economically feasible solutions.

¹ <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/alison-chase/bidens-historic-action-30x30>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/06/fact-sheet-the-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal/>

³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/cleanenergy/inflation-reduction-act-guidebook/>

⁴ <https://climatechange.ri.gov/resilient-rhody>

⁵ <https://climatechange.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur481/files/documents/ec4-ghg-emissions-reduction-plan-final-draft-2016-12-29-clean.pdf>

⁶ <https://climatechange.ri.gov/>

⁷ [https://climatechange.ri.gov/act-climate/2025-climate-update#:~:text=The%202025%20Climate%20Action%20Strategy,Reduction%20Grant%20\(CPRG\)%20process.](https://climatechange.ri.gov/act-climate/2025-climate-update#:~:text=The%202025%20Climate%20Action%20Strategy,Reduction%20Grant%20(CPRG)%20process.)

⁸ <https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/programs/bnatres/forest/pdf/forest-value.pdf>

- 1) Create a carbon task force to design and implement forest carbon offset programs for Rhode Island
 - 2) Explore and encourage partnerships between landowners, municipalities, and neighboring states
 - 3) Consider the launch of a habitat banking, nature credits program as modeled by the UK's Environment Bank
 - 4) Create a statewide certification for climate-smart and climate-friendly forestry practices
- 1) Create a carbon task force to design and implement forest carbon offset programs for Rhode Island**

Carbon offset programs are rapidly emerging throughout the nation as the global carbon market expands, and carbon sequestration gains momentum as a mitigation measure against climate change. This growing industry provides financial incentives to landowners to preserve and protect forests, rewarding them for conservation efforts. Currently there are three main categories of actions for forest carbon offsets including afforestation or reforestation, avoided conversion, and improved forest management. Since over half the state is forested, opportunities for Rhode Island likely lay within the latter two categories, avoiding conversion and improved forest management. The Climate Trust, a non-profit organization formed in 1997 that manages carbon offset programs and projects for organizations, defines avoided conversion as “preventing the loss of forest (to a non-forest use), by permanently dedicating land to continuous forest cover and maintaining or increasing stocking levels.”⁹ Forests can also be permanently conserved through conservation easements or transfer to public ownership. Since 69% of land in Rhode Island is privately owned, it’s essential that the state unlocks and extends new opportunities to landowners to participate in carbon markets. The United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (UN-REDD), is an advisory platform for forest solutions to combat climate change. UN-REDD defines improved forest management as, “forest management activities which result in increased carbon stocks within forests and/or reduce GHG emissions from forestry activities when compared to business as usual”¹⁰. Improved forest management can be achieved through various activities, including enrichment planting, stand irrigation and/or fertilization, reducing timber harvest levels, deferring harvest or extending rotations or cutting cycles, or designating reserves¹¹. The ultimate hurdles the state faces in entering these markets are accessibility and economic feasibility of programs for small and medium size landowners; this is due to long-term commitments, averaging around 40-100 years, and relatively large minimum acreage requirements, around 30-40 acres.

⁹ <https://climatetrust.org/the-climate-trust/>

¹⁰ <https://www.un-redd.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.fenixcarbon.com/learn/improved-forest-management-ifm>

In 2021, an Executive Order by Governor Janet Mills of Maine created the Forest Carbon Task Force under the state's four-year climate action plan, *Maine Won't Wait*. The task force's primary goal is to research and later implement voluntary forest carbon programs for small and medium sized land owners, who wish to protect their land and additionally, use it for carbon sequestration¹². As a result of a 10-month long process involving substantial public input, the task force released a consensus report outlining a variety of recommendations for the state to implement, to ensure Maine's forests contribute to achieving the state's climate goals. These recommendations range from conducting preliminary review and research regarding national practice-based carbon programs, current harvest levels and carbon stocking data, and technical assistance for climate friendly management practices, to identifying financial incentives for carbon sequestration, loggers, and exploring partnerships with commercial landowners, and other states¹³.

Potentially, a carbon task force in RI could function as an arm of the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4)¹⁴, a body established by the Resilient Rhode Island Act in 2014, aimed at emphasizing resilience, and developing practical solutions for Rhode Island to combat climate change. The 2014 law also establishes two advisory boards, the EC4 Advisory Board and the EC4 Science and Technical Advisory Board, incorporating input from all state agencies on all aspects of RI's clean transition¹⁵. The 2021 Act on Climate updates the EC4 by adding language that requires the council to acknowledge input from the two advisory boards, strengthening their role. Potentially, the upcoming 2025 Climate Strategy Update could address the need for the EC4 to establish a Carbon Task Force, using the state of Maine's Executive Order and related actions to guide the process.

Currently, given minimum acreage program requirements, there are only two carbon developers that are semi-viable options for Rhode Island, the Forest Carbon Work's Family Forest Carbon Program and Finite Carbon's Core Carbon program. The Forest Carbon Works Program supports private forest landowners in long-term conservation of their forests through membership with Forest Carbon Works, and has become available to RI in the last few years. The program includes two primary management plans; the first is a 20-year contract that involves "growing mature forests and delaying harvests so that you can engage in sustainable forest practices as directed by the experts", and the second is a 10-year contract for "future forest enhancement" which can involve practices such as maintaining undergrowth and managing invasive species¹⁶. The shorter contracts increase this programs viability, however maintain a minimum requirement of 40 acres to enroll. Finite Carbon's Core Carbon Program is expected to be available to Rhode Island in late 2023. This program also has a minimum 40 acre requirement, and offers quarterly payments with a competitive price for carbon offsets in the first

¹² <https://www.maine.gov/future/initiatives/climate/climate-council/forest-carbon-taskforce>

¹³ https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.future/files/inline-files/MaineForestCarbonTaskForce_FinalReport.pdf

¹⁴ <https://climatechange.ri.gov/ri-executive-climate-change-coordinating-council-ec4-overview>

¹⁵ <https://climatechange.ri.gov/resilient-rhody>

¹⁶ <https://forestcarbonworks.org/who-we-are/>

three years; for the remaining years of the contract, payments are based on fixed percentages of the carbon offset price¹⁷. Since the average size of a RI landowner parcel is 17 acres, it's likely that even if available, residents will not qualify for these programs, and lose out on the opportunity cost associated with diversified income

In August of 2023, the U.S. The Department of Agriculture's Forest Service announced that \$150 million from President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act would be available to "help underserved and small acreage forest landowners connect to emerging voluntary climate markets"¹⁸. The carbon task force could explore these opportunities as they are aimed at enhancing state participation in carbon markets and preparing residents to do the same. Research would revolve around carbon stocking data throughout the state, harvest levels and durable wood products industry economics, forest management practices to increase carbon sequestration, and identification of opportunities to advance multi-landowner, multi-municipal, and multi-state efforts.

2) Explore and Encourage partnerships between landowners, municipalities, and neighboring states.

As previously mentioned, Rhode Island is about 54% forested, with 69% of forest land owned by private landowners. According to the USDA Forest Service's Report, *Trends in Rhode Island Forests: A Half-Century of Change*, farming in the state peaked in the 1800s while forest land increased until the 1950s, and has been slowly declining ever since. The continued declination of forestland is substantially due to development pressure, specifically on forest and farm lands; since 1953, the state's population has grown nearly 30%, increasing to over 1 million. Furthermore, as of 2002 when the report was published, about 26,700 private individuals and enterprises held about 75% of the state's timberland, while state, federal and other public owners held the remaining 25%. The report notes that the number of RI landowners who own less than 50 acres of timberland has more than doubled since 1973, showing a decrease in the size of the averaged landowner parcel¹⁹. This fragmentation continues with the expansion of roads, homebuilding and other development. Forest fragmentation has detrimental effects on many bird species and other wildlife. Additionally, landowners with small parcels are less likely to manage their forests for timber harvesting, hunting and fishing.

For these reasons it is imperative that Rhode Island looks to unite landowners and municipalities within the state to create continuous tracks of land that increase habitat connectivity and wildlife corridors, sequester larger amounts of carbon, and provide various economic benefits when properly managed. Massachusetts is one state that has recognized the benefits of cooperative partnerships, and offers valuable insight and suggestions for their own municipalities that may be applicable to Rhode Island cities and towns.

¹⁷ <https://corecarbon.com/>

¹⁸ <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2023/08/22/biden-harris-administration-invests-150m-connect-underserved-and>

¹⁹ <https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/programs/forestry/documents/ritrends.pdf>

In 2021, University of Massachusetts Amherst, in partnership with Mass Audubon and Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, released a report titled, *Forest Carbon Market Solutions: A Guide for Massachusetts Municipalities*. The report outlines benefits and tradeoffs for municipalities participating in these programs, what makes a successful carbon project, best options for municipalities and small landowners, options for climate-smart forestry practices, next steps and more. The authors mention that projects less than 3,000 acres are generally not financially viable in New England, as project costs will outweigh revenue; they suggest that smaller properties can enter the market by joining an aggregated project that includes multiple landowners. The report describes similar recommendations for municipalities, such as aggregating projects with other municipalities or even other landowners, which may become more complex²⁰. The Tri-City carbon offset project is one example of a successful multi-municipality project which gained significant legal support. Necessary for the project's success was the aggregation of land to divide the cost burden, strong partnerships between local and state government, the use of the same forester for the entire project, and a strong understanding of legal requirements. The project is expected to offset hundreds of tons of carbon in the next decade, and produce substantial revenue for the municipal partners involved²¹. Other strong examples of this model are The Nature Conservancy's Forest Carbon Co-op Model²² (multiple private landowners) and the King County (WA) Rural Forest Carbon Project²³ (municipal and third-party landowners).

It's clear that without these partnerships the state evades the opportunity to offer programs to landowners. As Rhode Island prepares to participate in the carbon market, it's essential that the state learns from its neighbors and builds on existing research to create the most efficient and sustainable models for programs. Creating strong local and state partnerships, improving coordination throughout the state in regards to forestry practices, and conducting literature review to see the trials and tribulations of those who have gotten through the preliminary process, will be essential in preparing. Though accessing the aforementioned federal funds through the USDA Forest Service, \$150 million from the IRA, Rhode Island can establish and strengthen these partnerships.

3) Consider the launch of a Habitat Banking, Nature Credits program as modeled by the UK's Environment Bank

Existing state climate initiatives drastically undervalue the role forests play in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Frequently, the benefits of forests are reduced to the amount of

²⁰ <https://www.mass.gov/doc/forest-carbon-market-solutions-a-guide-for-municipalities/download>

²¹ <https://ecocart.io/offset-project/tri-city-forest/>

²² <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/how-we-work/finance-investing/naturevest/forests-and-carbon/>

²³ <https://kingcounty.gov/en/legacy/services/environment/water-and-land/forestry/forest-carbon.aspx#:~:text=King%20County's%20Forest%20Carbon%20Program,walking%20trails%2C%20and%20open%20spaces.>

carbon they sequester. Unfragmented, continuous forestland such as “core forests”²⁴ (continuous forest of 250 acres or greater) are large carbon sinks and therefore extremely important regarding reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. However, in order to properly value forests as a resource, it’s essential to recognize the broad scope of benefits they provide to not only wildlife but humans as well. *The Forest Values Report* describes these benefits in detail, but broadly they encompass clean air, clean water, economic value, human health and well-being, cultural value and wildlife habitat, in addition to climate change mitigation. For this reason, Rhode Island may benefit from introducing a habitat banking initiative in the form of a nature credits program, as the Environment Bank from the UK has recently done.

The Environment Bank’s primary purpose is to combat the critical issue of biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, through habitat restoration and creation²⁵. The EB is funded by the Gresham House British Sustainable Infrastructure Fund (BSIF II) portfolio, which aims to provide asset-based solutions to environmental and societal challenges²⁶. Gresham House is a specialist alternative asset manager that offers a broad range of funds, direct investments and co-investments, across a range of alternative investment strategies; a staple principle of their company is sustainable investing²⁷. The EB has secured substantial funds to “establish landscape-scale recovery sites managed with ecological integrity”. The EB works to shape nature recovery policy and guidance in the UK, resulting in successful implementation of biodiversity net gain (BNG), one of the most impactful pieces of environmental legislation passed in the UK. Throughout this process, the EB worked alongside biodiversity related organizations and policy makers like the Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures²⁸, Science-Based Targets Network²⁹ and UK Business and Biodiversity Forum³⁰, to create ‘Biodiversity Credits’.

EB provides a simply designed program that works to benefit landowners and developers, while improving the environment³¹. The organization is working to create a network of Habitat Banks across England, with 20 complete and 60 underway. A Habitat Bank is a parcel of land where there’s potential for improvement in biodiversity, or other ecosystem parameters. Typically, habitat banks are around 20 hectares in size, roughly 50 acres. The EB specifically seeks smaller parcels of land, in order to create this network, and considers a variety of lands; EB has habitat banks in unproductive areas, old pasture lands, and under-performing agricultural land. Then, the EB works with the landowner to establish a habitat that works in that particular area, and ensures the best natural outcomes; with this goal in mind, an EB team of ecologists works with the landowners to create a Habitat Management Plan, to ensure improvement opportunities.

²⁴ <https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/programs/bnatres/forest/pdf/forest-value-es.pdf>

²⁵ <https://environmentbank.com/discover/about-us>

²⁶ <https://greshamhouse.com/row/real-assets/sustainable-infrastructure-investment/>

²⁷ <https://greshamhouse.com/row/about/>

²⁸ <https://tnfd.global/>

²⁹ <https://sciencebasedtargetsnetwork.org/>

³⁰ <https://www.business-biodiversity.co.uk/>

³¹ <https://environmentbank.com/nature-shares>

This program provides an opportunity for landowners to diversify their income. The EB essentially leases land from the owner, creates the Habitat Management plan with the owner, and continues to provide payments to the owner for 30 years. Income is broken down between a lease payment for the land and a habitat management payment, and payments increase annually to a capped amount. Additionally, the EB funds all inputs to the process including cultivating land, planting or fencing that needs to take place, and all requirements for getting the Habitat Bank ready to perform. Not only does this program provide an alternative income for farmers, landowners, etc., but it also supports the essential restoration of a biodiverse landscape and tackles climate change.

Rhode Island could significantly benefit from the flexibility this initiative offers. The small parcel requirement for this program would align well with the average landowner parcel of a Rhode Island resident, and allows for the combination of several parcels. Furthermore, the program works to incorporate a diverse set of habitats, increasing the program's viability in the Northeast. Biodiversity credits are similar to carbon offset credits at first glance, but they encompass a much broader range of benefits by rewarding other roles that ecosystems play in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Of course, this effort may be too large for Rhode Island alone, but a pilot program similar to this in New England could prove extremely beneficial.

There are various resources Rhode Island can access to structurally build out a nature credit pilot program. The Natural Resource Conservation Service provides several programs in regards to easements, assistance, and forest management. The NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), allows individuals to work one on one with experts to develop a conservation plan that aligns with practices and activities for the area in question. EQIP offers both technical and financial assistance to landowners in this program, and has several targeted initiatives such as air quality, landscape conservation, and on-farm energy³². Another program run by NRCS is the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which is the largest conservation program in the U.S, and functions very similarly to EQIP. CSP contracts are typically for five years, with an opportunity for renewal. Payments to landowners in this program are based on two components, maintaining the existing level of conservation, stewardship and enrollment, and payments to implement additional conservation activities³³. NRCS also offers an Agricultural Land Easement Program, and Wetland Reserve Easements, respective of potential conservation area. Another avenue within NRCS is the Rhode Island Forest Health Works Project, which offers two distinct opportunities for land protection through entity held easements, or U.S. held easements. Entity held easements help private and tribal landowners to partner with land trusts or other state or local governments, to protect forestlands with easements. Federally owned easements allow individuals to enter into contracts with NRCS to establish conservation easements and protect critical forestlands³⁴. This project is funded by the Regional Conservation

³² <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/eqip-environmental-quality-incentives>

³³ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/csp-conservation-stewardship-program>

³⁴ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/rhode-island/rhode-island-forest-health-works-rcpp>

Partnership Program (RCPP), “a partner driven approach to conservation that funds solutions to natural resource challenges on agricultural land.”³⁵ Furthermore, a larger grant from the RCPP could potentially be used to help build this program as well.

Rhode Island has various resources that can assist in the creation of a habitat banking program similar to the Environment Bank’s of the U.K. Many existing programs can be taken advantage of to aid in the preliminary process of creating a program, including forest management plans, and financial and technical assistance. By relying on the state’s functioning programs, this goal can be accomplished more efficiently.

4) Create a statewide certification for forest climate-smart and climate-friendly practices

Public recognition through state certification is an important way that individuals and organizations can be rewarded for their climate-smart and climate-friendly forest management practices. Climate-smart practices represent the best management practices to mitigate and adapt to climate change, such as activities that protect and increase biodiversity, enhance the natural landscape, encourage native habitat, and more. Through Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities, the USDA has invested over 3 billion to fund nearly 150 projects to provide direct, meaningful benefits to production agriculture. This program provides technical and financial assistance to landowners to implement climate-smart practices, and develops markets for climate-smart commodities³⁶.

In 2009, New York launched the Climate Smart Communities (CSC) program, an interagency initiative of the state to support local governments in leading their communities to reduce GHG emissions, adapt to climate change and support a green economy. The program offers benefits such as leadership recognition, technical assistance, and access to grants³⁷. Local governments sign a voluntary pledge and use the CSC framework to guide progress towards their individualized goals. In New York, there are currently 395 registered communities including over 9.5 million people. This program focuses primarily on renewable energy and electrification, but includes important goals related to land use as well. There are a variety of actions defined under the goal, “Implement climate-smart land use” including smart growth policies, policies for local food systems, natural resources inventory, local forestry programs, zoning for protection of natural areas and more. This program can serve as a model framework for a Rhode Island climate-smart certification program.

In Massachusetts, the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness grant program (MVP) provides support for cities and towns in the state to begin planning and building for climate change resiliency. The MVP Action Grant offers financial resources to “communities that are seeking to advance priority climate adoption actions to address climate change impacts resulting

³⁵ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/rcpp-regional-conservation-partnership-program>

³⁶ <https://www.usda.gov/climate-solutions/climate-smart-commodities>

³⁷ <https://climatesmart.ny.gov/>

from extreme weather, sea level rise, inland and coastal flooding, severe heat, and other climate impacts”. Before receiving the grant, communities need to complete the Community Resilience Building (CRB) process, and receive “MVP Community” designation. An interesting facet of this program is that it’s also available to Commonwealth “political subdivisions” and any authorities, commissions, board, and other eligible entities³⁸. Eligible entities can apply for projects that align with municipal climate resilience plans, by receiving a letter of support from the municipality/ies related to the project. Rhode Island runs a similar program through the Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank called the Municipal Resilience Program (MRP), aimed at identifying priority actions in the state to build statewide resilience and work collaboratively with municipalities. This program offers direct support to cities and towns to provide information, overcome current challenges and strengthen communities all regarding resilience to natural and climate related hazards³⁹. By expanding the MRP to encompass community certification, valuable incentives are created for municipalities to partake in such initiatives; recognition provides an opportunity for organizations and individuals to serve as leaders in the state and provides additional action towards prioritizing climate resilience. Educational aspects of the program such as best management practices could be incorporated into the existing process and conducted simultaneously. This would improve community outreach and education aspects, and allow municipalities to continue this work throughout their communities. Funding for this effort may come from a Landscape Scale Restoration Grant by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service. The Landscape scale restoration program is a competitive grant program for state and private forestry, promoting collaboration and science-based restoration, in accordance with the State Forest Action plans or equivalent restoration strategy⁴⁰. Projects in this program address large-scale issues such as wildfire risk reduction, watershed protection and restoration, and invasive species spread.

The key to developing a climate-smart certification program in Rhode Island, is to incorporate the concept into existing programs and processes. As aforementioned, RIDEM and NRCS have a multitude of programs and resources to assist landowners in the development of forest management and conservation plans. A potential integration of a climate-smart forestry certification could be through the creation and implementation of a climate-smart forestry management plan, assisted by either RIDEM or NRCS programs. This would be a relatively easy addition, as it would serve as an alternative option for the landowner when consulting with these organizations.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Rhode Island has several resources that can be expanded and utilized to take advantage of newly available federal funds, to advance forest conservation throughout the state. The creation of a carbon task force would further research and design of forest carbon

³⁸<https://resilient.mass.gov/mvp/#:~:text=The%20original%20MVP%20Planning%20Grant%20offers%20funding%20to%20municipalities%20that,to%20plan%20for%20the%20future.>

³⁹<https://www.riib.org/solutions/programs/municipal-resilience-program/>

⁴⁰<https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/landscape-scale-restoration>

offset programs in the state, in order to prepare RI landowners to participate in emerging markets. The exploration and encouragement of partnerships between landowners, municipalities and neighboring states would enhance connectivity and resilience through forest carbon programs, while increasing economic feasibility for participating parties. Diverse programs such as habitat banking and nature credits programs would encourage various other climate resilience efforts, such as increase of biodiversity, native species and natural environments. Lastly, incorporating a statewide certification for climate-smart forestry practices increases incentives for individuals and organizations to further protection and conservation of forests, sustainably. Each of these recommendations is supported by initiatives in other areas that can be applied and worked into Rhode Island's program and policy structures.

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