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Audubon Society of Rhode Island

WOODLAND STEWARDSHIP AND PRESERVATION ACT OF 2019

SUMMARY

The Woodland Stewardship and Preservation Act of 2019 recognizes the importance of Rhode Island's woodlands. It creates public policy to preserve the integrity and viability of the state's woodlands and requires the RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) to develop by April 2020 a woodland stewardship program and by July 2020, guidance for cities and towns to designate specific areas as woodland significant natural areas. RIDEM's work will be guided by a community advisory council with diverse membership and expertise.

The bill addresses vital issues:

- It recognizes the importance of Rhode Island's woodlands to the ecology of the state, the health and welfare of the people of the state, and the quality of life in the state.
- It utilizes principles of ecosystem-based stewardship that are state of the practice and are prominently recommended in the Rhode Island Woodland Partnership Strategic Plan 2017-2021.
- It is comprehensive and adaptable to the diverse communities of Rhode Island, it does not create any new state administrative bureaucracy.
- It relies on local actions through comprehensive planning and zoning for its implementation.
- It provides for state issued guidance to facilitate local efforts and to assure that the purposes of the Act are met.
- It establishes a transparent, publicly accountable process, that includes the creation of a community advisory council, to develop the state issued guidance.
- It builds on and integrates existing provisions of state law to accomplish its purpose.

The Woodland Stewardship and Preservation Act of 2019 has nine sections. The first section, the core of the bill, is a new section to chapter 2-9 of the general laws, Forestry Functions of Department of Environmental Management.

Section 1 has the following six subsections:

- (a) Findings
- (b) Title, Purposes, and Public Policy
- (c) Definitions
- (d) Resource planning, community advisory council, ecosystem-base stewardship, and wood land significant natural area preservation.
- (e) Woodland and agriculture
- (f) Woodland in the coastal zone
- (g) Woodland stewardship and preservation in state plans.

SECTION 2. Amends DEM's powers to add woodlands to the existing power in 42-17.1-2 (34) to promote stewardship and adds the implementation of the new section 1-9-1.1 to the duties of the existing division of forest environment in the department.

Section 3. Adds woodlands to the list of defined terms in the comprehensive planning enabling act, chapter 45-22.2, includes woodland in mapping existing conditions and in natural resource identification and conservation section of the local comprehensive plan.

SECTION 4. Adds woodland to the existing preservation purposes, to the list of definitions, and to the standard provisions contained in the zoning enabling act, chapter 45-24.

SECTION 5. Amends the statute creating the coastal resources management by including woodlands within the council's existing powers regarding shoreline protection and coastal wetlands.

SECTION 6. Establishes enforcement powers similar to those found in other environmental laws.

SECTION 7. Directs that the language of the act is to be construed manner that enables putting that Act's purposes in to effect.

SECTION 8. Is a severability clause, if courts over turn a portion of the Act that will not invalidate its remainder.

SECTION 9. Establishes that act is effective upon passage.