

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 1/14/2025 9:36:20 PM

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Comments: As a former Vermont resident and nature lover who raised dear little ones in this beautiful state, I'm writing with a heavy heart about the potential loss of the Telephone Gap Forest. Vermont's landscapes are more than just scenery-they're lifelines, rich with history and vital to the ecosystems and communities that call them home. The thought of losing this maturing forest, and others like it, is heartbreaking.

Growing up in Vermont, my family instilled in me a deep respect for the land. We understood the importance of living in harmony with nature, caring for it so it could continue to care for us. The Telephone Gap Forest is a shining example of the kind of thoughtful stewardship Vermonters have practiced for generations. Losing it would mean not only the destruction of an irreplaceable ecosystem but also a profound impact on the species that depend on it, like the northern long-eared bat and the potential return of the Canada lynx.

Old-growth forests like Telephone Gap hold immeasurable value, both ecologically and culturally. These ancient ecosystems have taken centuries to develop, providing critical benefits that cannot be replaced: carbon storage, biodiversity, and a deep connection to the identity of the communities they anchor.

The decision to clear-cut this forest directly conflicts with President Biden's executive order to protect mature and old-growth forests as part of our national climate strategy. This federal directive recognizes the essential role these forests play in combating climate change and enhancing resilience. Yet, the outdated management plan allowing large-scale logging in Telephone Gap Forest prioritizes short-term economic gains over long-term benefits. Vermont has an opportunity to lead by example, embracing a science-based approach to conservation that supports the goals of this initiative while safeguarding the very essence of what makes our state special.

The environmental costs of clear-cutting this forest cannot be overstated. The Otter Creek watershed, a vital resource for the region, depends on intact forests to maintain water quality and stability. Removing large sections of forest destabilizes soils, increases sedimentation, and disrupts aquatic ecosystems, while stormwater runoff threatens farms, homes, and infrastructure downstream. These are risks we cannot afford to take-not for ourselves, not for future generations.

This isn't just about preserving land; it's about honoring Vermont's legacy of responsible land stewardship. Protecting Telephone Gap Forest would reaffirm Vermont's commitment to its natural heritage, setting a powerful example for other states to follow. Groups like Standing Trees Vermont and 350VT have it right-conservation, not destruction, is the path forward.

I urge decision-makers to prioritize the long-term health of the Telephone Gap Forest and all who depend on it-plants, animals, and people alike. This forest has inspired and nurtured generations, including my own family. It deserves to continue doing so for those to come.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

Emilie McDonald