

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 2/12/2026 2:43:53 AM

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Comments: During my time as a graduate student at the University of Vermont, I had the opportunity to study and assess the fire-adapted communities of the Northern Escarpment and to provide insight on their present condition from an ecological standpoint. At the outset, I was admittedly surprised, as it appears many of the escarpment's neighbors are, to hear that fire-adapted natural communities are present in the Green Mountains - a landscape which is characterized more broadly by the predominance of cool, damp northern hardwood forest. I came to understand that the sun-dried slopes of the escarpment are uniquely suited to support fire-adapted species, and over the course of my assessment, it became clear that certain communities such as dry oak forest were more extensive than previously thought. However, as this proposal outlines, they are failing to sustain themselves in the absence of fire, and are transitioning to more common mesic species.

Diversity, not only of species, but of ecosystems, is critical in protecting the overall health of the region and the myriad species which depend on the resources this landscape provides - from bears who use red pines to mark their passage, to the grouse who seek shelter in thickets of huckleberry. As the hundreds of fire-scarred oaks and pines on these slopes can attest, this proposal does not seek to introduce fire as a novel force in this landscape, but to return it as a process - one with which it has evolved and on which it depends. These fire-adapted communities contain the state's most drought-tolerant species - their decline is a major concern considering a pattern of increasing drought severity and wildfire risk. Vermont's resilience to extreme climate events depends on the ability of its landscape to withstand such stressors.

It's wonderful to see that the specific scope outlined in the proposal to address this is modeled on an adaptive management framework, and that restoration activities will proceed according to the way the vegetation is observed to respond to individual treatments. To the extent that's logistically feasible, management should aim to replicate historical fire regimes, which were frequent but irregular in both intensity and spatial extent. I'd be interested to see whether the deer browse pressure will be dissipated as fire applications release flushes of oak seedlings, reducing the need for investment in fencing or other interventions.

This project and this place is dear to my heart. Thanks to all at the Forest Service for your commitment to stewarding this land in a way that increases its ability to withstand environmental stress, and support the life within and around it.