Grow Smart RI supports the State’s ambitious renewable energy goal. We believe reducing our reliance on fossil fuels is critical to enhance the quality of our environment and mitigate the effects of climate change. But how we achieve this goal is as important as reaching the goal itself. Continuing to clear cut thousands of trees in pursuit of this goal is unacceptable and unnecessary. We can and must do better. That’s why we enthusiastically support the RI Forest Conservation Act (H-8141).

This Act would require the State to lead by example and not fund or provide any incentives to encourage renewable energy development on any portion of forested tracts of 250 acres or greater. These forested areas have been determined by DEM to have the best forest values.

By far, the greatest and most urgent threat to forest loss is the existing State Renewable Energy incentive policy that is inadvertently but dramatically encouraging the large scale clear cutting of forests for renewable energy development. It is doing so by not providing any targeted economic incentives for renewable energy development in environmentally preferable but more expensive locations such as landfills, brownfields, rooftops, parking lots, and gravel pits.

Our conservative estimate suggests there are over 1,000 acres of land where utility scale solar development has already been developed or proposed. Moreover, a request by the State for proposals for an additional 400 MW of renewable energy is scheduled to be issued this summer. If only half of that 400 MW is ground based solar, and our existing state renewable energy subsidies are not changed, an additional 1,000 acres of forested land could be clear cut.

Another pending bill, the RI Energy Resources Act H-7793, unfortunately does not address the urgency for RI to change its current renewable energy siting incentives to encourage subsequent renewable energy facilities to be located on developed or disturbed locations and disincentives to prevent the continued loss of Rhode Island’s natural assets. Massachusetts and Vermont have already established such economic incentives and disincentives, and Connecticut is in the process of developing its own siting reforms.

We believe that Rhode Island must learn from the mistakes that prompted these States to reform their renewable energy siting programs. Simply adopting the model municipal renewable energy siting ordinance that would be required by H-7793 would not prevent the further clearing of forests and could accelerate forest loss because municipalities will NOT be required to adopt a renewable energy siting ordinance until July 1, 2019. By then a great deal more avoidable environmental damage may be done.
Over the last few years, prior to the recent solar energy development boom, RI has seen significantly more development within our urban services boundary than in rural forested towns. In fact, many rural towns have not had a major subdivision in several years. Moreover, most new subdivisions are using some form of conservation development to preserve approximately 50% of the site in perpetuity. State low-impact development stormwater regulations encourage less land clearing and the preservation of native vegetation for all development.

So the clear and present danger to RI forests right now is renewable energy development, NOT residential subdivisions, strip malls or Big Box stores. Nevertheless, we recommend amending the Forest Conservation Act to prohibit any state economic incentives for encouraging any development on any portion of forested tracts of 250 acres or greater. In fact we have discussed this amendment with several of our environmental allies who also are receptive to it. Since there is a critical need to prevent any further forest fragmentation, we and these same environmental allies also support an amendment that would require DEM and the Statewide Planning Program to establish a broad based advisory group to thoroughly assess all options for preventing the net loss of forestland to attain the greenhouse gas reduction targets established in the Resilient RI Act. Since it is urgent to prevent subsequent forest loss this group should report on their findings no later than December 31, 2018.

Another reason to be vigilant about protecting our remaining forestland is that The 2014 Resilient RI Act’s required greenhouse gas reduction levels can only be reached by no further net loss of forest, according to the Rhode Island Greenhouse Reduction Plan.

Protecting Rhode Island’s forests is important both economically and environmentally. Rhode Island grown wood products contribute over $700 million annually to the State’s economy and support over 3,000 jobs. In addition, our forests play a critical role in mitigating climate change. Nationally, the Nature Conservancy concluded recently that forests are the most economical means to mitigate climate change because of their ability to absorb and store carbon. Based on our analysis of a variety of studies, RI forests can attenuate the annual carbon emissions of approximately 7 million automobiles. DEM estimated the carbon storage value of RI forests to be $39 million annually.

By adopting the RI Forest Conservation Act, Rhode Island can achieve our greenhouse gas reduction and renewable energy development goals while avoiding damage to our natural resources and community character. This is the kind of achievable “Win/Win” scenario for our environment and quality of place that must become an urgent state priority.