



## Is Logging the Pinelands Just a Vote and Signature Away?

### Bill to allow harvesting of state-owned public lands clears legislative committee with bipartisan backing

*By Tom Johnson, June 11, 2013 in Energy & Environment*

The state is looking to open up logging on New Jersey's public lands, most of which were largely acquired through Green Acres bond issues and other public funds.

In an issue once again splintering the environmental community, a bill ([A-2837](#)) allowing the Department of Environmental Protection to develop a harvest program on state-owned lands won bipartisan approval yesterday from a legislative committee.

To proponents, the bill would produce healthier forests and a better habitat for the plants and animals that live there. To critics, however, allowing commercial interests to log parks and forests is a [violation of the public trust](#) under which those open spaces were set aside.

An estimated 1.8 million acres, or about 42 percent of New Jersey's land is forested, out of which approximately 38 percent is publicly owned. Much of it is in trouble, plagued by an overpopulation of deer, invasive species that crowd out native flora, and a decline in habitat for threatened and endangered species.

The legislation has gone through numerous changes over the past few years, but has never won final approval. Now it needs only to clear the Assembly and be signed by the governor to become law. Unlike previous versions, the bill would allow logging in the 1 million acres protected in the Pinelands.

The latest amendments helped win the support of many conservation groups, but not that of other environmentalists. The changes include development of a proper forestry management plan through limited harvesting and oversight by a third-party certification process.

Under the bill, DEP would develop a program to provide for the stewardship of forests on state-owned lands in accordance with the standards established by the independent not-for-profit Forest Stewardship Council.

**Instead of being a forest harvest program, the amendments make the bill a forest stewardship program, according to Elliot Ruga, a senior policy analyst for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition. His organization opposed previous versions of the legislation but backs the new bill.**

But Bill Wolfe, executive director of the New Jersey chapter of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, argued the bill lacks adequate safeguards to protect public lands.

“Just 10 years ago, the Legislature enacted the Highlands Act to prevent fragmentation of forests,” he told the Assembly Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. “It’s moving in a completely different direction.”

The irony about the contention surrounding the issue is that the bill approved by the Assembly committee is sponsored by Assemblyman John McKeon (D-Essex), widely viewed as the biggest environmental stalwart in that chamber. Sen. Bob Smith (D-Middlesex), whose bill (S-1085) [also cleared the committee](#), is likewise regarded in the Senate.

Both McKeon and Smith are open to accepting further amendments to the bill, according to Assemblyman Nelson Albano (D-Cape May).

Even with its many critics, both measures were endorsed by some of the more influential conservation organizations in the state, including the New Jersey Audubon Society, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, and the Pinelands Preservation Alliance -- as well as the New Jersey Farm Bureau.

But Wolfe said Audubon has conflicts of interest because it receives management/consulting fees for the program.

According to the bureau, the increased logging, largely abandoned on public land in the past few decades, could revive a strong forestry economy for those in the private sector by driving competition among logging interests.

Other environmental organizations found too many flaws in the bill.

David Pringle, campaign director of the New Jersey Environmental Federation, said his organization’s biggest concern was the lack of any enforcement provisions for violating approved forest stewardship plans.

“It will lead to more logging in some of the best state lands and there are no consequences,”

Pringle said.

Any revenue generated from the harvesting would go first to fund the cost of the program, and then to finance restoration projects in forests to increase diversity of species. But opponents said the projected \$2.7 million raised by logging may not cover all of the costs of the program.

“Without clear rules in place, we could be creating open season on open space,” predicted Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club.