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With climate on the mind, lawmakers pitch tree protection plans

08 December 2021

Tuesday's hearing of the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture focused on infrastructure, but not the kind that can be built. Instead, lawmakers considered infrastructure that has to be grown as they reviewed a handful of bills that seek to put trees to work to address climate issues.

The carbon storage power of forests will be key to actually realizing net-zero emissions in Massachusetts over the next three decades, but trees can also be important tools to address some of the impacts of a changing climate, like the spread of "heat islands" where urban development contributes to higher temperatures and worse environmental conditions for residents.

Rep. Michael Finn, who last session chaired the House Committee on Global Warming and Climate Change, said the state's public land policies were written decades ago, before climate change was understood to be an imminent threat, and that they need to be rewritten to reflect the realities of today and the state's emission reduction targets.

"Our forests are naturally beautiful and should be protected so future generations can enjoy the beauty and life that they bring to the commonwealth," the West Springfield Democrat said. "This bill will help fight global warming by helping keep carbon stored in trees and soil, protect native biodiversity, mitigate climate change impacts for all Massachusetts residents and prevent further forest carbon loss due to commercial forest management."

Finn's legislation (H 912) would designate about 412,000 acres of forest and watershed land controlled by the Department of Conservation and Recreation as parks, which Finn said is defined as an area for recreation, and reserves, which Finn said is "a place where ecosystems are preserved."

The designations would prevent the land from being logged, leased or sold, according to Climate Action Now Western Massachusetts. Finn's legislation is one of three priority bills for the organization this session.

"This bill will allow for limited cutting of trees and forest management if it is proven to be protecting the public and preserve certain habitats," Finn said. "An important distinction of this bill; what the bill will not do is require additional funding, reduce jobs in the private, nonprofit or public sector, it will not affect how private, municipal or counties use their lands, and will not restrict how private foresters or loggers conduct their businesses."

Though a parade of environmentalists and others lined up to testify in support of Finn's bill at the Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Committee hearing Tuesday, it was also opposed by the forest products industry.

"A particular concern is that the Division of Water Supply Protection has reasons at times to be removing trees related to blowdown events, which can cause havoc particularly causing some silting of reservoirs such as the Quabbin Reservoir, Wachusett Reservoir, these are the main water sources, of course, for the city of Boston and surrounding communities. And literally disallowing them from being able to care for the reservoir just simply is not good policy," Evan Dell'Olio, vice president of

Roberts Energy Renewables, told the committee. Roberts Brothers Lumber Co. is an affiliate of Roberts Energy Renewables.

Sen. Cynthia Creem and Rep. Lori Ehrlich proposed legislation (H 905/S 504) that seeks to quantify and protect urban trees that can help mitigate some of the effects of climate change, like by providing shade and limiting air pollution. The bill would establish a municipal reforestation program within the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

"People are beginning to recognize that trees are a critical piece of municipal infrastructure, just not an aesthetic enhancement," Creem said.

Under the bill, every city in town in Massachusetts would be required to develop a reforestation plan that includes a tree inventory, identifies ideal planting sites and details the municipality's approach to long-term maintenance and care.

It also would set out a framework to provide consistent funding to help cities and towns with the implementation of reforestation plans and ongoing work associated with their plan. But the funding was envisioned to come from the regional cap-and-trade program that Gov. Charlie Baker recently backed away from, according to a bill summary prepared this year by Gas Leaks Allies.

Also on the committee docket Tuesday was a Sen. Adam Hinds proposal to mandate that the state assess its old-growth forests and protect them from logging and development by establishing a system of permanent old-growth forest reserves on state lands (S 557).

Old-growth forests or original forests largely undisturbed by human activity have "immeasurable" value to people and wildlife, the Massachusetts Audubon Society said, but are only protected from logging and development by administrative policies that are far easier to change than laws.

"There's only about 1,500 acres of true old-growth remaining in the state and it's almost all entirely on state lands but surrounded by other state lands that have mature forest. So this bill would create an opportunity to establish long-term old-growth forest reserves and create a process for that," Heidi Ricci of Mass. Audubon said.

Hinds also filed a bill (S 558) ordering a study of "public and private woodlands and woodlots in the Commonwealth to measure the aggregate amount of carbon sequestered in said woodlands and woodlots in the trees, roots and soil."

The climate law that Gov. Baker signed in March requires that greenhouse gas emissions in 2050 be at least 85% below 1990 emissions. In order to actually net out at zero emissions by 2050, Massachusetts will have to make up the remainder — up to 15% — through things like carbon sequestration and other strategies that can help draw pollution from the atmosphere.

But deforestation for development in New England deals a double-whammy to the climate protection effort by adding carbon dioxide to the air and then further limiting the ability to recapture it, a report conducted by Clark University for The Nature Conservancy found earlier this year.

The six New England states and New York are collectively releasing an estimated 4.9 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere each year through forest loss. And being without the storage power of that lost forest means the region is also losing out on 1.2 million metric tons of CO₂ equivalent (CO₂e) in carbon sequestration each year, the report said.

Source: <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/12/08/forest-protection-legislation-carbon-storage-massachusetts-net-zero>