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To the Members of the Committee on Environment,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.70.

For the record, my name is Sam Lincoln. I'm a multi-generational landowner and business owner in Randolph Center. Our family land is enrolled in the Use Value Appraisal program—UVA.

I've worked in the woods since I was young. As an adult, my first logging job was salvaging timber on the Waitsfield Gap after the 1998 ice storm. I've been a certified Master Logger since 2016, serve on the Board of Directors of the Professional Logging Contractors of the Northeast, and previously served as Deputy Commissioner of Forests, Parks, and Recreation from 2017 to 2020. I've harvested timber for more than 60 landowners within fifteen miles of my home. Most of those properties were enrolled in UVA.

I support H.70 and the inclusion of UVA-enrolled land in the conserved land inventory and in the definition of "natural resource management area."

Science, experience, and human curiosity lead us to continuously improve how we interact with the environment. One of those improvements is our increasing value for keeping land in an undeveloped state for a multitude of reasons. UVA has been an incalculably valuable tool for improving our stewardship. It's also been essential and responsive to addressing a significant cost of ownership, which is property taxes.

Act 59 calls for conservation at all scales and maintaining ecological connectivity. The most recent draft states that the entire connectivity network is needed for ecological function.

That network already exists — in large part — through UVA-enrolled land.

UVA provides landscape stability. It provides flexibility for families. It allows working stewardship while keeping land intact. Permanent conservation works for some landowners, but it does not work for all.

We hear about forest loss and biodiversity decline. But we rarely ask private landowners the most important question: Why did you subdivide your land?

Understanding root causes is essential to enacting sustainable solutions.

For many families, the answer is economics.

Permanent conservation alone does not solve the economic pressures landowners face. Meanwhile, mills are closing. Markets are shrinking. The forest economy — which has supported stewardship across rural Vermont for generations — is under enormous strain. That strain contributes directly to fragmentation.

UVA connects the dots between tracts of permanently conserved land. UVA enrolled landowners already own their land. They pay property taxes. They follow management plans developed by licensed professionals and approved by regulators. They pay the cost of implementing those plans out of pocket. They steward habitat, water quality, and forest health. They are doing conservation work… today. The

financial cost to support and enhance UVA in a process of continuous improvement will be far less than purchasing development rights of such a large portion of Vermont's private lands.

UVA is not the only conservation tool. Permanent easements are not the only solution either. Vermont needs a mix of tools — and we should recognize the landowners who have already chosen conservation through UVA and not having them at the table since the inception of this effort risks missing the full picture.

I'll give one example of a missed opportunity in land use policy. Under Act 181, five- and ten-acre house lots remain part of regional planning conversations. In my view, nothing has fragmented rural Vermont more than those scattered lots. Orange County doesn't have large housing or commercial developments – we have spaghetti lots up and down our rural roads with single family homes. A generation ago, Randolph was dominated by 100- to 500-acre farms and forest tracts. While those of us that work the land have watched the increasing fragmentation that limits forest access and agricultural viability, the land use regulation modernization process has not taken up our suggestions for provisions such as implementing conservation subdivisions as a broader tool – smaller clustered housing lots with larger portions conserved. Without input from boots on the ground landowners, I'm not sure how the trends in fragmentation will be redirected, other than the full weight of Act 250 being applied as a deterrent to development to those that can't afford the cost.

If we're serious about connectivity and landscape integrity, we must align policy with the way Vermonters have actually protected land — and UVA is central to that. Our demonstrated actions and definition of conservation should count too.

I respectfully ask you to advance H.70 so the other committees and the full Legislature can debate this amendment to Act 59. Including UVA land in the conserved inventory equitably recognizes the stewardship of a broad cross-section of Vermonters as we work toward a common goal of protecting our landscape.

This is not a partisan issue. It is a rural Vermont issue. It is an equity issue. And it is being raised by constituents who have invested in conservation for generations.

Thank you.