

TEN REASONS WHY INDIANA SHOULD PROTECT TEN PERCENT OF OLDER FOREST AREAS: NINE SCIENTISTS WEIGH IN



SB 420 would help protect more contiguous forest tracts, as seen in this view of Morgan Monroe State Forest. Photo by Elizabeth Mahoney.

The room was packed—the great majority supporters of SB 420. This bill, sponsored by Sen. Eric Bassler, Republican from Washington, Indiana, would set aside 10% of our state forests from logging to mature into old growth forests.

The occasion was a February 13 meeting of the Indiana Senate Natural Resources Committee. Chairwoman Senator Sue Glick had granted SB 420 a hearing, and IFA lined up nine scientists to testify in favor of the bill. DNR staff and a timber industry lobbyist testified against the bill.

While the bill did not ultimately receive a vote, this hearing substantively advanced the dialogue about state forest logging at the statehouse which, for the last ten years, had been denied those objecting to the rampant increase in state forest logging. A week after the hearing, IFA facilitated the follow-up letter below signed by scientists and other supporters and sent it to the committee members:

Dear Senate Natural Resource Committee Member,

We thank you for considering the Old Forest Bill SB 420 on Monday, Feb. 13 in

the Natural Resources Committee. In spite of the apparent polarization, we think that SB 420 will help the DNR achieve the goals of having a healthy forest and 10% older forest areas as stated in their Strategic Plan and Sustainable Forestry Certification documents. We would like to take this opportunity to follow up on a few points:

- Indiana’s State Forests support many forest dependent species including amphibians¹, insects^{2,3}, mosses⁴, snails⁵, birds⁶, plants, fungi⁷, and more.^{8,9,10,11} In fact, of the 128 migratory land birds that breed in the central hardwoods, 70 depend upon forest habitat.¹² Non-game species deserve as much protection as game species, especially when they are already endangered (e.g. the Indiana Bat).
- Many bird species are in decline across the country for a variety of reasons, including the presence of invasive cowbirds and predation by domestic cats.^{13,14,15} Management practices that help some species may harm others.

- Ruffed Grouse is a game bird whose populations are notorious for somewhat mysterious fluctuations.¹⁶ This is an example of how much we have yet to learn about ecology. The grouse population in southern Indiana began to decline in the 1980s when clear-cutting was at its peak in the Hoosier National Forest, even though clear-cutting is supposed to create favorable conditions for grouse. Over the past 25 years, the creation of more early succession habitat in our State Forests and Fish and Wildlife Areas has not been successful in bringing back populations. We conclude that factors other than habitat availability may be limiting grouse populations, for example increased nest parasitization by wild turkeys or predation by raccoons.^{17,18}
- Migratory songbirds dependent on mature forests are in serious decline. The state-endangered Cerulean Warbler has declined 70% since the 1960s. The most favorable option for nesting success of this species is a no logging scenario.¹⁹



Senator Eric Bassler (R-39) presents SB 420 to the Senate Natural Resource Committee at the February 13 hearing: “We can leave some forests as nature intended.” Photo by Anne Laker.

- Logging and logging roads create openings that allow cowbirds and invasive plant species to penetrate forest interiors. To prevent this, conservation strategies should preserve large, un-fragmented core areas in each forest region.²⁰
- Oak-hickory forests support a high level of biodiversity but timber harvests preferentially remove oaks because of their dollar value. One of the difficulties in regenerating oaks is that deer eat the saplings. Logging that creates early successional habitat supports increased deer populations.^{21,22}
- This bill will not eliminate disturbances that create openings in our State Forests.

DNR defines an opening as at least 1 acre in size, but high winds, ice, and age will continually take down old trees and create numerous small openings where new trees can emerge. Further, SB 420 does not preclude the use of prescribed fire (controlled burns) in Old Forest Areas.

- Logging, even selective logging, creates a younger forest by removing the largest and oldest trees. DNR has committed to have 10% "Older Forest Areas" but they have not said that these areas would be off limits to logging. SB420 would ensure that trees in these areas would be allowed to complete their natural life-cycle.

- Our State Forests currently contain some areas where trees are 80-120 years old, but many Indiana tree species can live several hundred years. Allowing 10% of our State Forests to mature into uneven-aged, old growth forests will increase overall biodiversity and resilience to overcome pests and weather extremes.^{23,24,25}



Worm-eating warblers are among the wildlife that depends upon undisturbed interior forest for nesting. Photo by W. Scott Evans.

- State Forests are NOT the only state public lands open to logging. Logging and wide-scale cutting of vegetation regularly occurs at State Reservoirs, State Recreation Areas, and State Fish and Wildlife Areas to maintain early successional habitat and young forests.



Most of Indiana forests are small woodlots that are not conducive to successful nesting by many forest songbirds. Photo by Elizabeth Mahoney.

In conclusion, we do not agree with the idea that logging is the only way to ensure a healthy forest. Having parts of our state forest maintained as controls and ecological reference areas where nature is allowed to take its course will create a healthier, more diverse forest and provide forest managers with an important baseline for understanding the effects of various forest management practices. This is in keeping with the "Old Forest Areas" Policy that the Division of Forestry had prior to 2005.

We urge the Natural Resources Committee to report SB 420 favorably to the full Senate. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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⁹Fredericksen, T.S. 2014. Thermal regulation and habitat use of the eastern box turtle in southwestern Virginia. *Northeastern Naturalist*, 21 (4): 554-564.

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¹³ibid

¹⁴North American Breeding Bird Survey, <https://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/bbs.html>

¹⁵Winslow, et al. 2000 Within Landscape Variation in Patterns of Cowbird Parasitism in the Forests of South-Central Indiana. In *The Ecology and Management of Cowbirds and their hosts.* Smith, Cook, Rothstein, Robinson, and Seoly (eds) University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

¹⁶FAQs on Grouse Hunting and Management <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/48393.html>

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¹⁸https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Ruffed_Grouse/lifehistory

¹⁹Wood, P.B., et al, *Management Guidelines for enhancing Cerulean Warbler breeding habitat in Appalachian hardwood forests.* American Bird Conservancy, The Plains, Virginia, p18.

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