



247 Station Drive  
Westwood, MA 02090

**Denise M. Bartone**  
Director, Licensing & Permitting  
denise.bartone@eversource.com  
781-441-8174

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**Ms. Tori Kim, Director**  
**MEPA Office**  
**100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900**  
**Boston, MA 02114**

Re: Comments on proposed updates to MEPA policies

Dear Ms. Kim:

Eversource Energy Service Company ("Eversource") appreciates the opportunity to submit this comment letter in response to the proposed updates to MEPA's Green House Gas Policy and Climate Resiliency Policy, described in the June 2024 presentations.

Eversource is New England's largest energy delivery company with approximately 4 million electric and natural gas customers in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire and is dedicated to and values its role as an environmental steward in connection with providing reliable and safe energy delivery.

To meet our obligation to provide vital public services, Eversource must follow national, regional, and industry standards and regulatory policies when conducting its capital and maintenance projects. It also is critical that our approach to operating and maintaining our system fully supports and enables the electrification required to mitigate climate change. In furtherance of the Commonwealth's clean energy objectives, Eversource must proceed in a timely manner with its projects to ensure our system can safely handle increased electrical load as well as support proliferation of renewable generation and storage that is becoming an increasing part of the modern electrical grid.

Eversource believes that some of the proposed modifications to the policies will negatively impact Eversource's ability to meet our obligations. We expect that some of the additional requirements in the proposed revisions will impede the implementation of the Commonwealth's very aggressive clean energy transition.

#### **Greenhouse Gas Emissions Protocol and Policy**

As part of its goals to confront climate change and reduce regional greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has established the Clean Energy Climate Plan, an ambitious roadmap designed to transform the region's power grid by increasing renewable energy production and electrifying the heating and transportation sectors. It acknowledges that the achievement of Net Zero GHG emissions will require significant new distribution and transmission infrastructure to deliver renewable and clean energy. Eversource recognizes the crucial role the electric system will play in this transformation, and the importance of providing a clean, equitable power grid for future generations.

Eversource is intimately familiar with MEPA's Greenhouse Gas Emissions Protocol and Policy and has provided comprehensive greenhouse gas analyses, as part of previous ENF and EIR filings, to demonstrate that our projects carefully consider greenhouse gas impacts and adopt reasonable means and measures to help reduce those impacts.

However, the proposed regulatory and policy changes to include a new review threshold related to "forest clearing" **should not apply** to projects within the legal boundary of existing electric utility rights-of-way (ROWS). To fulfill our

responsibility to provide a cost-effective and reliable supply of energy to ratepayers, Eversource must be able to utilize the maximum extent of its legal ROW easements for its intended purpose of electric transmission and distribution. Tree removal on electric ROWs is often required to facilitate the development of clean energy infrastructure and associated clean energy interconnections. Governor Maura Healey's Commission on Energy Infrastructure Siting and Permitting was formed to make recommendations to reduce and streamline permitting timelines for clean energy infrastructure and associated clean energy interconnections. A new forest clearing threshold will slow down development of many clean energy projects and drive-up costs associated with many reliability projects, which will have a significant impact on our customer rates and the Commonwealth's energy goals.

Tall-growing trees in electric ROWs pose a risk to the system's safe operation, which can result in widespread electric power outages or other public safety issues. Power outages can impact the stability of communities by disrupting communications, water, and transportation services. They can be especially dangerous if they occur during extreme cold or hot temperatures and for those that rely on electricity to operate essential medical devices. This has become increasingly important over the last several years as severe weather events resulting in extended outages have become more common. Increased electric grid reliability and resiliency reduces GHG emissions by preventing an outage and the dispatch of local generation sources, thus averting tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e that would otherwise be released to the atmosphere.

Further, Eversource conducted a comprehensive carbon mitigation analysis as part of its Final Environmental Impact Reports for the WT-02 (EEA No. 16567) and WT-11 (EEA No. 16570) Transmission Right-of-Way Reliability Program (TRRP) Projects. This analysis showed that the TRRP project reduced GHG emissions over 40 years by preventing dispatches or outages annually. Each time the Project prevented an outage, CO<sub>2</sub>e that would otherwise be released to the atmosphere remained sequestered. This study underscores the positive benefits of vegetation management on utility ROWs from a carbon sequestration standpoint.

Eversource's ROWs are comprised of vegetation that can safely coexist with the transmission lines and increase biodiversity, because they are maintained as early successional habitats and encourage the growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

Additionally, Eversource would like to understand how the Secretary intends to administer the "mitigation fund" to offset the loss of carbon sequestration associated with forest clearing. The purpose of MEPA is to allow meaningful consideration and public review of potential environmental impacts associated with projects under their jurisdiction. Developing a mitigation fund and/or mitigation requirements through the MEPA process is inconsistent with the purpose of MEPA and conflicts with the other state and local permitting processes. Review of any impact from such work is conducted sufficiently through the regulatory permitting process and appropriate avoidance, minimization and mitigation measures are incorporated into resulting permits. MEPA review of such work would only represent an additional source of delay and cost to the rate payers and to the Commonwealth.

To address the concerns raised above, Eversource recommends that the changes read as follows:

The Agency's current policy update at which a GHG analysis would be required is: "... *Projects that will alter any MEPA review threshold for land alteration may potentially be subject to this requirement.*" Eversource suggests the Agency restore the original language or implement, as shown below, an exemption similar to those already within the MEPA land alteration threshold.

*“Projects that will alter any MEPA review threshold for land alteration may potentially be subject to this requirement, unless the Project is consistent with an approved conservation farm plan, forest cutting plan, other similar generally accepted agricultural or forestry practices, **or within the legal boundary of an existing utility right of way, whether held in fee or subject to an easement, that will be used and maintained in the service of the public**”*

#### **Social Cost of Carbon (SCC):**

While Eversource understands the need to consider the social costs of carbon on projects, the proposed changes cause uncertainty because the requirement for SCC is at the Secretary's discretion. Without additional guidance regarding SCC factors and how they will be used to analyze project impacts, Eversource cannot comment further on this potential new requirement. Eversource is willing to remain engaged in the development of SCC factors and calculation methodology.

#### **Climate Adaptation Protocol**

Eversource recognizes that the impacts of climate change are increasingly playing a crucial role in the operation of our electric, gas, and water infrastructure. We have taken concrete steps to assess, retrofit, and design our system to withstand climate change while incorporating data from the most current federal, state and local climate studies into the early phases of design for our projects. We feel this will support our core mission to provide safe, reliable, and resilient service to our customers.

Eversource appreciates MEPA's attention to climate adaptation and supports incorporating the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) climate tool into ENF form. Nevertheless, MEPA's expectation for any analysis should be consistent with the intent of MEPA, which, as described above, is to facilitate environmental planning in the earliest phases of design for a Project.

In closing, we appreciate your consideration of our comments and concerns with the proposed changes to the draft language contained within the MEPA PowerPoint and look forward to opportunities for continued discussions with you and your Office as you formulate the detailed language of any potential policy reform.

Sincerely,



Denise M. Bartone  
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