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Acadia Center Testimony in Support of House Bill 7399 Updating the Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014

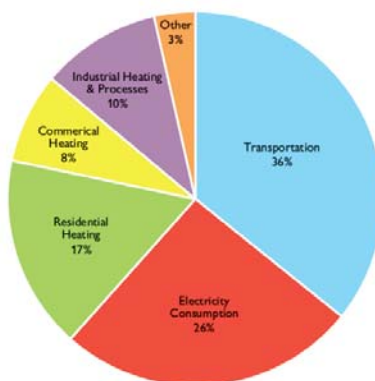
Chairperson Bennett and Members of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee,

Acadia Center is pleased to submit testimony in support of House Bill 7399. Acadia Center is a non-profit research and advocacy organization committed to advancing the clean energy future. Acadia Center operates primarily in the Northeast through comprehensive advocacy and problem-solving through innovation, collaboration, and reliable solutions-oriented information.

Acadia Center supports House Bill 7399 as a key step in the continued efforts to decarbonize the Rhode Island economy and address the growing threat of the climate crisis. The Resilient Rhode Island Act of 2014 originally set aspirational goals for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 10% from 1990 levels by 2020, 45% from 1990 levels by 2035 and 80% from 1990 levels by 2050. The proposal in H-7399 would make these reduction targets binding and enforceable while also updating goals for the outer years to better align with current scientific understanding of the climate crisis' magnitude. In particular, the goal for 2035 is marginally increased from 45% to 50% and the goal for 2050 is increased from 80% to 100%. The bill also recognizes the 2050 goal may be met in part by counting carbon offsets to account for those final, marginal areas of our economy that may be difficult to decarbonize.

While Rhode Island has achieved important reductions in emissions attributable to the power generation sector, due in large part to the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative and leading energy efficiency programs, more work is needed to meet future targets. This update to the Resilient Rhode Island Act will help set the stage for additional efforts to cut emissions from two other key sectors of our economy—heating and transportation. Fortunately, all the technology needed to implement systemic change is commercially available and can easily be encouraged in Rhode Island.

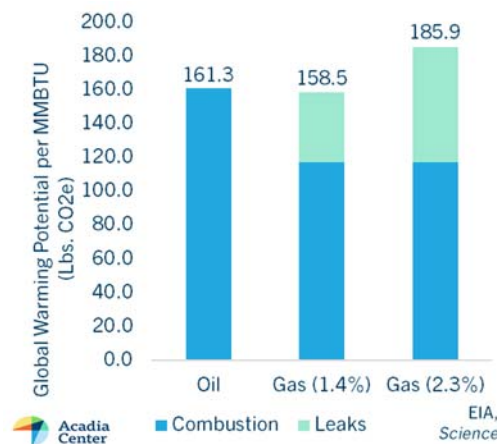
Fig. 1: Rhode Island Greenhouse Gas Emissions By Sector (2016 data)¹



Heating

Residential and commercial heating account for approximately 25% of Rhode Island’s total GHG emissions. Including an additional 10% from combined industrial heating and processes brings the total to about a third of the state’s total GHG emissions.ⁱⁱ The primary heating fuel in the state is fossil gasⁱⁱⁱ delivered via pipeline infrastructure into people’s homes and businesses. In addition to the local health impacts, risks to public safety, and carbon dioxide emissions, fossil gas pipelines also leak a significant amount of methane directly into the atmosphere. Methane has a global warming potential in the first 20 years that is as much as 86 times as potent as carbon dioxide that is produced from fossil fuel combustion.^{iv} In fact, when accounting for methane leakage, gas distribution systems for heating purposes may be worse for the climate than even heating oil, as demonstrated in Figure 2 below.

Fig. 2: Global Warming Potential of Fossil Gas, Accounting for Distribution System Leakage

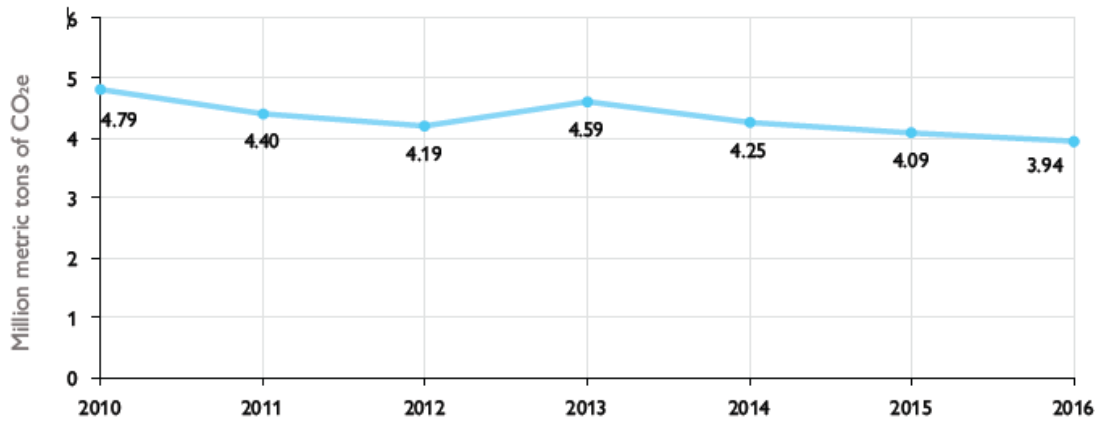


As we gather and understand data about the ramifications of increased methane usage, it is appropriate to adjust emissions reductions targets to more accurately target necessary reductions. It is also vital to take further legislative and administrative actions to better help Rhode Islanders reduce their carbon footprint by making use of highly efficient electric heat pumps and other low- or no-carbon heating strategies. Acadia Center is participating in the Heating Sector Transformation process convened by the Office of Energy Resources and looks forward to working with the General Assembly to advance important reforms to the Rhode Island heating sector market.

Transportation

Transportation is the largest single sector of GHG emissions in Rhode Island comprising 36% of the total according to the RI Department of Environmental Management. Transportation, to date, has also been one of the most difficult sectors in which to reduce GHG emissions despite the commercial availability and economic advantages of electric vehicles. At the federal level, recent efforts to upend decades of progress and roll back fuel economy standards have further injected uncertainty into emissions reductions opportunities in the transportation sector.

Fig. 3 GHG Emissions from RI Transportation Sector (2016 Data)



Locally, Rhode Island has fallen behind on its own Zero Emissions Vehicle (ZEV) commitments and has not funded its ZEV rebate program since 2017, despite the continued success and renewal of similar programs in neighboring states. Additionally, despite our state’s population density and availability of public transportation in most towns and cities, transit ridership—a key strategy to reduce emissions and traffic congestion—also trails far behind neighboring states.

Addressing transportation emissions will take a wide array of strategies and strategic investments. Fortunately, Rhode Island has been a participant for more than a decade in a regional effort to curb transportation emissions while investing in cleaner, more beneficial transportation strategies. The Transportation and Climate Initiative (TCI) will provide Rhode Island an opportunity to responsibly fund and finance investments in public transit, electric vehicles and charging infrastructure, pedestrian and bicycle improvements, port electrification, and other clean transportation alternatives to significantly reduce emissions. The state and region will also benefit economically from technological advancements, job creation, improved public health, and increased mobility.

While Rhode Island continues to explore the specific strategies above, it is vitally important that the General Assembly signal a strong commitment to emission reductions across all sectors by enacting H-7339 and adopt these updated, binding targets for Rhode Island. Acadia Center urges the Committee to vote for passage of this legislation. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Sincerely,



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ⁱ RI DEM. 2016 RI Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory. Published 20 December 2019, pg. 9

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pg. 7

ⁱⁱⁱ RI Renewable Thermal Market Development Strategy, Prepared for RI OER by Meister Consultants Group. Published January 2017, pg. 24.

^{iv} Deeper Decarbonization in the Ocean State: The 2019 Rhode Island GHG Reduction Study. Published 12 September 2019, pg. 14.