

TO: Secretary Bob Durand  
Executive Office of Environmental Affairs

Arthur Pugsley IV  
MEPA

FROM: Eleanor Tillinghast

DATE: 9/28/01

RE: EOE #12592, Manuel F. Correllus State Forest

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I was dismayed to learn that after years of inaction, DEM suddenly cited public safety as a reason to begin clearing firebreaks at Manuel F. Correllus State Forest without benefit of a MEPA review or a management plan. It characterized the situation as an emergency and thus exempt from normal MEPA procedures. It also ignored the recommendations of numerous scientists, some of whom had produced a report financed, in part, by its sister agency.

Section 11.13.3 of the MEPA regulations states that any project “undertaken to deal with future emergencies, or periodic recurrence of an emergency condition, shall not be considered an emergency action.” Nonetheless, according to one newspaper article, an Assistant Attorney General wrote that he would not second-guess state officials and local fire chiefs who want action now, and thus refused to halt DEM’s work. When the flag of public safety is waved, it is very hard for officials at any level of government to consider that the choice to adhere, instead, to regulations, established procedures, and science may be best for the public interest.

In 1999, you wrote a letter to Conservation Commission members expressing your deep concern over the increasing pressure to convert public parks and conservation lands to use for schools and other public facilities. You cautioned against the conversions and said “as public officials, we must act as trustees, to preserve this legacy for future generations.”

Public safety, children’s education, national security: there are always pressures, either emergency or chronic, to sacrifice seemingly expendable resources in order to protect other public needs. Once lost, however, they are never recovered. Virgin soil, rare species, an extraordinary ecosystem: why jeopardize all those with fire control techniques that scientists say may not accomplish the ultimate goal of public safety?

Everyone is concerned with public safety; the differences arise over how best to achieve it. If DEM can succeed at Correllus in using the threat to public safety to override all other values, what will prevent them from trying the same tactic elsewhere? Over and over? I think this is very worrisome and I hope you will, instead, require DEM to file an Environmental Impact Report and consider carefully alternative means of protecting public safety while restoring and protecting a unique environment. As our state’s top environmental public official, you are the trustee upon whom present and future generations depend.