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16 Meriden Road
Rockfall
Connecticut 06481-2961
T 860 346-2372
F 860 347-7463
email: info@ctwoodlands.org
web site: www.ctwoodlands.org

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Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

H.B. 6371: AN ACT CONCERNING FUNDING FOR THE CT DEP
S.B. 790: AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE INVASIVE PLANT COUNCIL
H.B. 5004: AN ACT CONCERNING LIABILITY FOR THEFT OR UNAUTHORIZED DESTRUCTION OF TREES, TIMBER OR SHRUBBERY
H.B. 5264: AN ACT PROTECTING MUNICIPALLY-ACQUIRED OPEN SPACE LAND
H.B. 6397: AN ACT CONCERNING OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION

Honorable Members of the Environment Committee:

My name is Eric Hammerling and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association, Connecticut's first conservation organization established in 1895. CFPA has offered testimony before the Legislature on issues such as sustainable forestry, state parks and forests, trails, and land conservation every year since 1897.

H.B. 6371: As you know, the DEP has been historically underfunded, but in light of tremendously difficult budgetary pressures, our general assessment of this budget proposal is that "things could have been worse." We appreciate that the funding proposal for the DEP does not include any layoffs of existing staff, retains seasonal positions, and did not force an ERIP (early retirement incentive program) that could decimate key programs and, in fact, reduce the agency's ability to raise revenues through programs like Forestry. Furthermore, we strongly support the concept of the Connecticut Conservation Corps as a way to help the state parks and forests address some long-needed infrastructure issues.

That being said, we are concerned about a few key elements within the Conservation and Development section of the Governor's Budget:

1. The Conservation Fund and the "special funds" which comprise it are proposed to be folded into the General Fund. Although there are some important savings realized within DEP through lower fringe benefit costs, we have a few significant concerns:
    a. doubling all fees under $150 will make it difficult for people with restricted incomes to utilize our state parks and forests. The Governor has supported "staycations" and our state lands should be the cornerstone of providing affordable local opportunities for outdoor recreation;

b. because the Conservation Fund is now gone, the proposed fee increases won't be targeted to support state parks, forests, and/or the staff that maintain key programs. So, it is possible that the fees will increase and the management of parks and forests as well as the management of our state's hunting and fishing resources will further deteriorate. We would support a modest fee increase, but a doubling of all fees under $150 without a direct benefit to the programs managing these resources seems to put the DEP's ability to provide recreational benefits to the public on very shaky ground; and

c. similarly, we are concerned that the revenues from timber harvests on state lands would not go to the Conservation Fund to help support the DEP Forestry program. A recent Yale Study found that the DEP could increase timber harvests on DEP parks and forests (while maintaining forest health and harvesting sustainably) by approximately three times with a modest increase in staff. This year, timber harvest revenues above $600,000 were to be targeted to the Conservation Fund to support forestry. Without a Conservation Fund, we would like to see a mechanism by which timber harvest revenues are specifically targeted to support DEP Forestry activities.

S.B. 790: The Invasive Plant Council has been a very effective body which has made several recommendations in this bill that we support strongly. Invasive plants are one of the primary reasons for the loss of native habitats and the undermining of healthy ecosystems throughout Connecticut and the nation. Sadly, the Invasive Plant Council has been tabbed for dissolution in another bill, and we hope that will not come to pass.

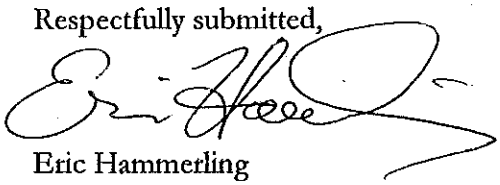
H.B. 5004: We support this bill as a measure to discourage the theft of valuable trees and shrubs possessing significant ecological, aesthetic, and other values.

H.B. 5264: We support this bill to ensure properties acquired by municipalities in the name of open space protection are appropriately conserved through a legal instrument such as a conservation easement.

H.B. 6397: We support the "Green Fund" bill which would provide municipalities with the authority to raise funds for local land, air, water or energy conservation projects through a 1% conveyance fee on real estate buyers.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Respectfully submitted,



Eric Hammerling
Executive Director