8 March, 2010

Dear Chairmen Meyer and Roy and Members of the Environment Committee:

On behalf of the Connecticut River Watershed Council, I urge you to take action on Senate Bill 123, An Act Concerning Preserving Natural Vegetation Near Wetlands and Watercourses. This bill provides much needed legislation to maintain healthy wetland ecosystem functioning by requiring natural transitional zones between wetlands and land used for other purposes. We are fortunate to have plentiful rainfall in Connecticut. In fact, our waterways rank among the greatest natural resources our state has. However, this gift will quickly turn against us as the wetter climate scientists predict for Connecticut due to global climate change materializes if we do not buffer our waterways with natural vegetation.

Naturally vegetated buffers maintain safe water quality and quantity in waterways. The water cycle has much faster turnover than soil exchange processes. Riparian buffers filter non-point source pollutants rainwater picks up from our air or in runoff into soil reservoirs where they will gradually degrade instead of flushing them throughout our watersheds. This can prevent excess nutrients from feeding algal blooms, which deplete water bodies of oxygen when they die. Riparian buffers also provide flood control by absorbing excess stream flow during storms and spring thaw. Temporary excess stream flow is a huge problem in urban areas where much of the land cover is impervious pavement, as in Hartford, our capitol city. Containing high flows in riverbeds with riparian buffers reduces stream bank erosion and reduces the risk of flooding in nearby buildings.

New streams of income also become available to property owners and the state when riparian buffers are constructed. According to the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, large woody debris enter waterways from riparian buffers, creating substrate for benthic organisms, creating habitats of varying water velocity, and trapping valuable sediment which would be lost during high flow. In addition, organic material which falls into waterways from riparian buffers feeds the bottom of aquatic food chains. More habitat and food for organisms at the bottom of an aquatic food chain allows the system to support more top predators, like game fish. Riparian buffers also provide temperature control and maintain dissolved oxygen in water bodies by shading them from summer and winter extremes. Cold-water species such as trout may be able to return, or be stocked by DEP, in parts of their natural range which they have abandoned because they are now too warm if riparian buffers are planted. Lower water temperatures also enable water bodies to better assimilate organic wastes, a function Connecticut's waters perform all too often when heavy rainfall triggers the release of raw sewage into the state's waters through combined sewage overflow systems. Furthermore, riparian buffers restore waterfowl habitat, which would allow the state to expand its populations of birds available for hunting. Lastly, the University of Missouri Center for Agroforestry points out that ornamental woody florals such as red osier dogwood, curly willow, and other berry-bearing shrubs can be planted in riparian buffers and harvested sustainably for florists.

In conclusion, we can take advantage of the full potential of Connecticut's waters if we protect them with natural vegetation. Water connects people. If you do your best to ensure that Connecticut's waters are clean, you are doing your best to ensure that healthy connections bond our communities. You can only say that you have been the best stewards of Connecticut's waters that you can be if you move SB 123 in this legislative session. It is as easy as 1, 2, 3!

Sincerely,

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