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*Conserving Connecticut. Connecting people to the land.*

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

Honorable Co-Chairs Kissel, Mushinsky, and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee,

My name is Eric Hammerling and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association -- the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. The core of our mission at CFPA is to ensure that State Parks and Forests are both established and well-managed for the public's benefit. We work closely with the Friends of CT State Parks and other partners to advocate for the State treasures that are our Parks.

So, first, I want to thank you for bringing the issue of "State Parks and Forests: Funding" into your sights. This is a very important issue that our state must reckon with before the many values of our State Parks and Forests are hopelessly diminished.

You have reviewed the 2003 Clough Harbour & Associates study on Park infrastructure, and the 2011 UConn Economic Study, and you can clearly see the disconnect between the economic, recreational, health, quality of life, and other benefits provided by our State Parks and Forests, and the lack of investment our state is putting into them.

107 State Parks and 32 State Forests cover almost 8% of the state's land area and are visited by 8 million people each year, but funding for maintaining these areas has been flat, and staff levels are decreasing through attrition and it is an increasingly difficult battle to replace each position as it is lost. Incidences of vandalism, littering, and crime are increasing, but an overworked Park staff and too few environmental conservation police officers cannot keep up.

We are losing ground, and the current trajectory for the Parks and Forests is unsustainable. Clearly, it is time to look at different models to keep our state treasures as assets rather than liabilities, and we appreciate your Committee's leadership.

In 2010, when parking and other fees were increased, we heard from many Park users who were frustrated to learn that their increased fees were not going to support improvements to or operations in the Parks. Several said that they would be glad to pay even more than the 35% increase at the time IF their money were going to the Parks rather than to the General Fund.

With new Pavilions and Cabins being built, there is an opportunity to direct these “new revenues” toward Park maintenance and improvement, or else the drain on full-time and seasonal Park staff will become even worse as new assets quickly become liabilities. Also, there is an opportunity to have revenues from entrepreneurial activities at Parks such as bike, kayak, or other recreation-related rentals go toward maintenance activities in those Parks. It fosters an entrepreneurial spirit amongst Park staff, and provides more opportunities for Park users.

Earlier this year, S.B. 1011, was introduced by the Environment Committee to propose mechanisms to dedicate certain user fees to DEEP for maintenance purposes. I think this kind of mechanism is fair, and we hope that S.B. 1011 is put forward again with cabins, pavilions, rentals, and perhaps other revenue-raising opportunities in the mix.

Volunteers already fill some of the voids left by the State in the Parks, and it is unfair and unrealistic to expect them to do even more. My organization, as part of our mission, maintains 825+ miles of blue-blazed hiking trails with volunteers, and many of these trails are hosted on State lands. However, there are many more trails on State Parks and Forests that go unmaintained and are becoming unsafe. Should the State close those unmaintained trails? No. Can CFPA volunteers maintain them all? No. DEEP should maintain them, but they need additional resources to do it.

I'd like to leave you with the following image that you can probably all relate to. Close your eyes and think about your neighborhood and the nicest home on your block. Then, picture that home with an unmowed lawn. Then imagine that home's roof with a hole in it. Then add a couple of broken windows and some garbage on the front lawn. As this situation worsens over the course of time, you realize that this is not just a problem with one neighbor, it is a problem for the entire neighborhood. It impacts the value of your home, and it may cause people to move out. The benefits of living on that block with that “nice house” can be lost, and it is time to take action now.

The State's Parks are beginning to suffer the same fate of that neglected home, and it will affect us all. Please be creative as you evaluate potential solutions to the chronic underfunding problem of our Parks and Forests. Thank you!

I'm glad to respond to any questions that you may have.