

## COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY



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Executive Director

### TESTIMONY

DATE: February 19, 2014

TO: Environment Committee  
Connecticut General Assembly

FROM: Karl J. Wagener  
Executive Director

RE: Raised Bill 70, AAC Preservation of Lands Under the Control of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the Department of Agriculture

The Council on Environmental Quality greatly appreciates your raising this bill. I want to explain why this legislation is so important.

Recently, you received a copy of the CEQ special report, *Preserved But Maybe Not*. (It is easily found on the CEQ website if you misplaced it.) The report was initiated in response to numerous complaints from citizens who were dismayed when various parcels of state parks, state forests and state wildlife management areas were proposed for transfer out of DEEP custody and/or state ownership. The report contains several recent examples. The proposals are more common than you might think. During the past three years, DEEP and the General Assembly have been asked to consider proposals totaling hundreds of acres. Fortunately, most transfers were not completed, but the door remains wide open. And that door should not be so wide open. Lands held in trust for the public should not be exchanged or given away except in extraordinary circumstances.

The proposals that we examined have a common thread. Someone – a developer, a municipality, another state agency, or a neighboring landowner – saw some undeveloped land and asked the state if they could have it for what they, the proponents, saw as worthy purposes. A proposal was made, either to the General Assembly or to DEEP, and a decision was made. Generally, the proponent provided information that put the land in an unfavorable light: poor soils, limited public access, invasive species, or some other deficiency. But where was the critical information about the land's true conservation value? For example: Why was the land acquired by DEEP in the first place? Does it harbor rare species? Can it be used for fishing or hunting? Is it a wildlife corridor that connects adjacent properties? The people making the decisions need this information. Too often, the factual information about the land comes late in the process, sometimes too late or not at all.

The proposed legislation would highlight the conservation value of the public's lands. It would communicate to would-be acquirers of state land that the door is not wide open to overly-optimistic (and time-wasting) proposals, and that state lands of high conservation value will in fact be preserved for conservation purposes – for all people, for all time.

The Council anticipates that there might be some changes to the language and would welcome the opportunity to provide additional input as the bill moves forward. Thank you for your consideration of these comments.