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16 Meriden Road
Rockfall
Connecticut 06481-2961
Tele: 860-346-TREE
www.ctwoodlands.org

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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Support/ Oppose
GOVERNOR'S BILL 6824: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2017.	Oppose Cuts to State Parks and CEQ

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For 120 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on sustainable forestry, state parks and forests, trail recreation, natural resource protection, and land conservation issues.

2014 was a year of great hope for Connecticut's State Parks. It was the 100 year centennial of the State Parks and a showcase of the remarkable 107 State Parks that had been established over the past century. CFPA, our partners at the Friends of CT State Parks, and many others Friends organizations and citizens reflected on the past, and looked forward to the excitement of the next 100 years for Connecticut's crown jewels. Numerous members of the General Assembly adopted their local State Parks, the Program Review and Investigations Committee printed a Report on the needs for additional State Park and Forest investments, and both the General Assembly and Governor supported numerous capital investments along with the addition of 9 new field positions to manage the State Parks that had been desperately needed for years. It felt, finally, like momentum for the State Parks was building and picking up speed.

For the State Parks, this Budget cut (paired with the fact that only 2 of the 9 positions approved by this body last year have been hired) is a sickening step backward, and we are asking you to reverse the \$2 million cut to the State Parks that is recommended in the Governor's Budget.

It is fair to note that this Governor has provided strong support in the Budget for several necessary capital investments in the State Parks during his tenure, but the cut of \$2 million to the State Parks will directly impact the level of services for the public that State Parks are able to provide for the next two years. We fully expect that if these cuts are not reversed, several State Parks in the communities you represent will be closed or left unmanaged as early as July 1st.

The majority of this \$2 million cut in each year of the biennium would fall on the seasonal workforce and would likely cut its ranks by approximately 2/3rds each year. That means that only 180 seasonal employees (compared to the average of 550 over the past few years) will be available to mow lawns, serve as lifeguards, clean bathrooms, pick up trash, maintain campgrounds and recreational areas, patrol facilities, or even staff the gates that collect revenues for the general fund. It's easy to see how quickly the visitor experience in our State Parks could degrade to become both unattractive and unsafe.

During difficult times, it doesn't make sense to make a devastating cut to an important economic engine like the State Parks. For example, a 2011 UConn Economic Study documented an annual benefit from

the State Parks of over \$1 billion and 9,000 jobs. In fact, for every \$1 that is invested in the State Parks, Connecticut receives \$38 in economic activity in return. For example, residential homes in close proximity to State Parks are generally more valuable and provide an estimated \$3-5 million/year in extra revenue to municipalities in the form of property taxes. If State Parks are closed or not maintained, property values will slide and property taxes to municipalities will drop. With that kind of return on investment, doesn't it make sense that we should invest MORE in our State Parks and not LESS?

I also want to express CFPA's opposition to the recommendation in the Budget to transfer the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to the Office of Legislative Management and eliminate its funding.

CEQ was established in 1971 to fulfill several important functions:

- Publish an excellent Annual Report on the state of Connecticut's Environment;
- Print the Environmental Monitor to provide opportunities for public input on proposed state projects that have potential environmental impacts that require scoping under the CT Environmental Policy Act (CEPA);
- Hold monthly public hearings to report progress and enable public input on various environmental concerns;
- Make recommendations to the General Assembly on legislation that may be required to improve Connecticut's environment; and
- Serve as Connecticut's premier environmental watchdog agency.

CEQ is currently an independent agency that operates with support from the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection for administrative purposes only. It has a very small budget of under \$185,000/year and is one of the best "bargains" in State government.

CEQ's independence is what allows it to provide fair, balanced, and unfiltered recommendations to both the Administration and the General Assembly. CEQ's status as a valued watchdog for Connecticut's environment would quickly come into question if that independence were not honored.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I would be glad to respond to any questions you may have.