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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
<b>S.B. 429:</b> AN ACT CONCERNING THE PASSPORT TO THE PARKS.	Support
<b>S.B. 449:</b> AN ACT CONCERNING THE DISPOSITION OF THE FORMER SEASIDE SANATORIUM FACILITY.	Oppose
<b>S.B. 338:</b> AN ACT CONCERNING THE USE OF CIA ACCOUNT FUNDS FOR COMBATTING INVASIVE SPECIES.	Oppose
<b>S.B. 424:</b> AN ACT AUTHORIZING BONDING FOR BIKEWAYS, GREENWAYS AND RECREATIONAL TRAILS.	Support
<b>S.B. 350:</b> AN ACT REQUIRING THE POSTING OF A DECOMMISSIONING BOND FOR CERTAIN SOLAR PROJECTS.	Support with inclusion of “core forest” with farmland

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

**CFPA supports S.B. 429** which clarifies the original intent of the General Assembly to protect Passport to the Parks revenues in a dedicated, non-lapsing account rather than in an appropriated fund in the General Fund that could be more easily swept or diverted. A non-lapsing account would also be more efficient for managing Parks.

The State Parks season does not line-up well with the state fiscal year or the annual uncertainties of the state budget process. No matter what happens in Hartford, the Parks season runs from Spring to Fall and the height of the season occurs on July 4th weekend, just days into the new fiscal year. Trying to guesstimate each year what resources will be available to operate and maintain the Parks is both inefficient for CT DEEP and has limited their ability to recruit, hire, and train seasonal workers like lifeguards who comprise 85% of the Parks workforce in mid-season. Budget uncertainty in the past has led in the past two years to closing 4 campgrounds, cutting back on lifeguards and other seasonal workers, limiting hours at public facilities, and shortening seasonal use opportunities. Establishing the Passport to the Parks as a non-lapsing, dedicated account would help ensure campgrounds stay open, facilities are properly maintained, and the public amenities of Parks are maximized. This is a critical time to fix this language as proposed in SB 429, since the Parks expect an increase in visitation this year of at least 10% over the typical 8-9 million annual visitors thanks to the Passport to the Parks waiving parking fees.

**CFPA opposes S.B. 449** which would force CT DEEP to issue a request for information to determine the “highest and best use” of Seaside State Park in collaboration with DAS, OPM, and the first selectman of Waterford. This is simply not necessary, is duplicative of the work already done by CT DEEP, and would set a bad precedent by formally inserting Waterford’s chief elected official into the decision to determine the “highest and best use” of state-owned, public property. A State Park is a public resource that must be managed to benefit the entire public,

and not be unduly influenced by a parochial interest. CT DEEP released a Master Plan for Seaside State Park in January that was prepared through a public process with input received from many local, regional, statewide, and even national interests. CT DEEP should be allowed to move forward with implementing the Master Plan which, of course, includes preserving public access to Long Island Sound. Please oppose this bill because it is unnecessary, a drain on CT DEEP's resources, and bad precedent to incentivize local meddling in the management of public land by a public agency.

**CFPA opposes S.B. 338** which would divert funding from the Community Investment Act's funds for open space protection to address the important issue of combatting invasive species proliferation in lakes. Although combatting invasive species in lakes is certainly a real concern, we believe that the CIA funding for open space is already inadequate, and that staffing at DEEP is insufficient to take on the administration of a new funding program.

**CFPA supports S.B. 424** which would re-authorize bonding for grants through the CT Recreational Trails & Greenways program that has put \$7 million since 2016 into 41 municipal and nonprofit grants as well as multiple State Park and Forest projects in more than half of all communities across the state. Without bonding re-authorization, DEEP would have no more matching grants available for creating, improving, or maintaining recreational trails. There is significant need for these grants, with a backlog of requests of over \$10 million. Plus:

- Recreational trails are one of the best ways that bond funds can be invested. Recreational trails for hiking, running, biking, equestrian, and other uses attract and sustain families and businesses, create healthy communities, and foster a high quality of life.
- In Connecticut, outdoor recreation generates \$6.9 billion in consumer spending, \$2.2 billion in wages and salaries in the private sector, \$502 million in state and local tax revenues, and supports 71,000 Connecticut jobs and much of this outdoor recreation is associated with using trails.
- Connecticut's recently updated State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) commissioned statewide surveys that ranked recreational trails at the very top of community assets and needs for the future.
- If restored, this bonding would be the only source of funding available in 2018 that could be invested in a wide variety of recreational trail projects around the state. Crucially, these funds can go where federal dollars cannot – such as planning, design, and smaller but critical connections to various state trails networks.

**CFPA supports the concept of S.B. 350** which would require a decommissioning bond for renewable energy projects developed on prime agricultural lands. However, we ask that “core forests” that are contemplated alongside prime agricultural lands for similar protection in other sections of the bill, also carry the requirement of a decommissioning bond to remediate a site after it is significantly disturbed. A baseline inventory of existing resources would help to determine what condition a site should be returned to as part of remediation.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony, and I am glad to respond to any questions you may have.