



### State Parks and Forests: Funding

#### Background

In June 2013, the program review committee authorized in concept a study of Connecticut's state parks and forests. The study focuses on funding of the state park system, including a comparison of revenues and expenditures within the park system and an assessment of the adequacy of funding to support short- and long-term operational needs.

State parks were first established in Connecticut 100 years ago, under the supervision of the State Park Commission, which became the State Park and Forest Commission in 1921. The commission was absorbed into the then newly established Department of Environmental Protection in 1971, which became the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) in 2011.

Currently, there are 107 parks (35,000 acres) and 32 state forests (228,000 acres) providing public outdoor recreation areas in the state. Parks and forests are used for various activities, including hiking, bird watching, picnicking, hunting, boating, fishing, swimming, and camping.

Approximately one-quarter of the parks and forests (35 of 139) charge fees for parking, admission, or camping. Fee levels are set by regulation and vary by residence status and by time and day (i.e., weekend or weekday) of entrance. In many cases, the fees are only assessed from April through October.

To complete this update, committee staff reviewed information provided by DEEP, including financial documentation and personnel interviews. Program review staff also reviewed relevant legislative documents and has conducted several interviews with knowledgeable persons and interested parties outside of DEEP.

#### Main Points

**State parks and forests are primarily operated by the Parks and Public Outreach Division within DEEP.** However, there is significant involvement by other DEEP divisions, such as wildlife management, environmental conservation police, forestry, and field support services. Most park-related divisions fall under the Bureaus of Outdoor Recreation and Natural Resources. Some parks also receive significant contributions from park-specific "friends" groups.

**The number of state parks and forests rose steadily from the 1920s through the 1960s**, with approximately 100 parks and forests established before 1970. Acquisition and designation slowed in the 1970s and nearly stopped in the 1980s before resuming over the last 20 years. These numbers do not reflect expansion of existing areas, a common practice.

**Total funding for state parks and forests increased yearly from FYs 05-09, and has remained in the \$15-16 million range the last 5 years.** Special Funds used for state parks were eliminated from the agency budget and transferred to the General Fund in FY10. A decrease in General Fund resources beginning in FY12 was offset by a notable increase in bond money. Park and forest revenues were over \$6 million in FY12.

**The number of full-time parks division staff decreased from 110 in FY08 to 89 in FY13**, a decline of 19 percent. The loss of staff has necessitated some park supervisors oversee more than one park management unit. At present, there are 18 supervisors for 23 units.

#### Next Steps

The final phase of this study will include an assessment of:

1. The adequacy of current funding levels to maintain existing service provision and expected future maintenance and improvements;
2. Park and forest use issues and trends, including describing shifts in demand for park services and potential use-conflicts, and their relative impact on park expenses;
3. Available performance measures regarding state park and forest operation, such as attendance, revenue, and safety data;
4. Short- and long-term planning efforts and implementation; and
5. Key components of Connecticut's state park system in comparison to those in a variety of other states. Special attention will be given to funding mechanisms used by other states to determine if Connecticut might benefit from using a different model.