

Executive Summary

State Parks and Forests: Funding

In 2013, Connecticut celebrated the hundredth anniversary of its state parks. Under the governance of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEEP), Connecticut's state park system consists of 107 parks and 32 forests covering over 255,000 acres. The purpose of state parks is to provide: outdoor recreation, including hiking, biking, boating, fishing, swimming, picnicking, and camping; protection of natural areas; and educational opportunities and programs.

In June 2013, the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee authorized a study of state parks and forests. Specifically, the study focused on funding for state parks and forest and whether it is "adequate" to support short- and long-term operational needs. The committee formally adopted the study scope on September 26, 2013.¹

Within this report, committee staff provides information and analysis of resource trends for state parks, including expenditures (operational and capital), revenue, and staffing. To further help determine whether resources are adequate, the study examined three metrics of park use: attendance, safety, and customer satisfaction; additional information and analysis of park system performance measurement and planning are provided. Although this report examines funding for state parks and makes conclusions on resource levels, ultimately, the determination of whether state park funding is adequate is a public policy decision.

Connecticut's state park system provides a wide range of recreational services for residents and non-residents while also protecting the state's natural resources and heritage. The system is a network of land types and involves different programs across several bureaus within the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection for its overall operation. To keep the study scope manageable, and still allow for proper examination of state park system funding, a comprehensive review of the department's State Parks and Public Outreach Division (Parks Division) was made. The division has primary responsibility within DEEP for the operation of state parks, which is accomplished through a system of central and field-level programs.

Overall, committee staff found funding for state parks steadily increased during FYs 05-10, but has been on a downward trend since then. The funding level for FY 13, adjusted for inflation, is slightly below the FY 06 level. Connecticut is also more reliant on general fund support than most other states. Conversely, almost all other states have funding mechanisms allowing them to retain either all or a portion of the revenue they generate within their systems of state parks. Connecticut law currently allows some parks to retain revenues from renting facilities in special accounts, but the revenue generated through parking, admission, and camping fees – which is the vast majority of revenue – goes to the state's General Fund.

¹ The Connecticut state park system includes parks and forests. The remainder of this report will use the term "parks" to refer collectively to parks and forests.

Staffing levels within the park system are down since FY 08. Decreases in key field personnel, namely park maintainers and supervisors, have occurred generally since FY 09. This has resulted in some park management areas with maintenance staff levels below what would normally be considered functional and safe, given the types of work performed. In addition, there are not enough field supervisors to fill all current supervisory positions. As a result, the department has required staff to take on additional supervisory responsibilities, resulting in some supervisors working in a “temporary service in a higher class” capacity. In the final analysis, committee staff recommends a partial realignment of the funding mechanism for state parks intended to allow the system to regain a portion of the funding and staffing decreases over the last several years.

Park-generated revenues have exceeded \$6 million annually since CY 11. After a spike in revenues in CY 10 due to an increase in fees (35 percent increase for residents and 50 percent increase for non-residents), both paid attendance and overall revenue have dipped and may be trending downward. Connecticut’s fees are at or above regional and national averages for state parks, though fees are only collected at one-quarter of all parks and most fees are also limited to the peak park season between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Operationally, planning within the park system is primarily “crisis” driven. The system lacks structured attention to performance-based measurement. Important performance data are undergathered and underutilized for analysis purposes. Further, budget cuts and the lack of position refill authority may hamper the division’s efforts in these areas. At the same time, additional focus on overall system performance, based on accurate and adequate data is necessary. Committee staff recommends a Results Based Accountability (RBA) approach, including development of an RBA report card, as a streamlined way for the division to increase its performance-based analysis.

Taken together, the committee staff recommendations presented in this report are intended to provide a solid foundation for achieving a state park system funding mechanism that is better balanced with system needs, and operations and planning efforts that are more performance oriented.

List of Recommendations

- 1. DEEP should fully develop and submit the necessary reports required under C.G.S. Sec. 23-15b(c), and ensure each report is available on the department’s website for state parks in accordance with the statutory timeframes.**
- 2. A portion of the proceeds, as determined by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection on an annual basis, from renting cabins located within state parks or forests should be deposited within a Maintenance, Repair, and Improvement account for the specific park where such cabin(s) is located. The funds should be used to help offset maintenance costs of the cabins. If specific MRI accounts are not yet established for parks with cabins, they should be developed by DEEP.**
- 3. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Parks Division should fully coordinate with Friends groups and other parks associations to ensure in-kind labor**

and financial resources provided by such groups are taken into consideration for budget and planning purposes.

4. The use of season and lifetime passes should be tracked by pass type when parks are otherwise charging for parking or admissions.
5. The Parks Division should create a Results Based Accountability-style report card regarding park performance in accordance with the guidelines established by the legislature's Appropriations Committee. The report card should include measures regarding park use (e.g., attendance, safety, and satisfaction), as well as measures of park operations (e.g., planning efforts) and park personnel. The division's first report card should be developed by January 1, 2015, and annually thereafter. The report cards should be provided to the legislative committees of cognizance and made available on the Parks Division website.
6. The Parks Division should develop an improved attendance estimation methodology that: 1) spreads responsibility for point-in-time counts; 2) requires the performance of focused counts every five years; 3) uses quantitative numbers already available via revenue collection, and 4) expands the use of car counters.
7. The Parks Division should review the use and level of fees for each park location not less than once every five years, as part of an overall park review.
8. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection should use a portion of its bonding authorization for improving parks for purchasing car counters, such that vehicular traffic at all parks can be counted for weeklong or more portions of on- and off-season time periods by 2020, and during each subsequent five-year time period.
9. As part of its RBA report card, the Parks Division should develop formal metrics of safety within the state park system, including safety of the general public and division employees. The division should collect and analyze applicable safety-related data necessary to identify trends in the annual number and types of safety-related incidents on a system-wide basis.
10. The Parks Division should develop written criteria and procedures for project approval based on the division's system-wide priorities. This should be updated regularly and distributed to park unit supervisors and district managers upon revision. The status and evaluation of merit, based on fit with the established criteria and priorities, of all project applications that move beyond the district level should be communicated, in writing, to the park unit supervisor who first completed the application.
11. The Parks Division shall perform a formal review of a portion of the park system locations and resources therein on a rolling basis such that all park system locations are reviewed at least once by 2020. The review shall include an inventory and assessment of the condition of resources and facilities as well as an examination of the staffing needs of each location and shall be updated for each park location at least once throughout every subsequent five year period.

- 12. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection should involve field staff (i.e., district managers and unit supervisors) in the budget development and administration process for the Parks Division. Specifically, park unit budgets should be administered in coordination with the field staff throughout the fiscal year for non-personal service costs in a manner such that field personnel are aware of yearly budget limitations and allowed to retain some portion, as determined by the department, of any realized savings within the same park unit and/or district.**

- 13. Between one quarter and one half of revenue generated in state parks shall be appropriated biennially to the Parks Division, with the specific proportion at the request of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection and the approval of the Appropriations Committee. This appropriation shall be contingent upon the Parks Division's satisfactory participation in the Results Based Accountability process of the Appropriations Committee, or a similar performance-based measurement requested by the Appropriations Committee. The shared park-generated revenue shall not supplant the General Fund obligation to the Parks Division. The portion of park-generated revenues not appropriated to the Parks Division shall continue to support the General Fund.**

The Parks Division shall create a plan for use of park-generated revenue that balances the distribution of park revenue-based funds among the park or park units that generated the revenue and the needs of the entire system of parks and present such plan, along with the initial RBA-style report card, to the relevant Appropriations subcommittees, and the Environment Committee. The initial fund distribution plan should emphasize implementation of performance metrics and related data-gathering and analysis.