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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
<b>Raised H.B. 5009: AN ACT CONCERNING THE PUBLIC SAFETY CAPACITY OF STATE PARKS.</b>	Comments

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first nonprofit conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 128 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various State Park and Forest, trail recreation, sustainable forestry, and land conservation issues.

I am providing brief comments today on HB 5009, which has some technical problems, but does highlight an important issue faced by Connecticut's State Parks. Lack of staff and funding capacity is leading to unsafe conditions for the public in some places such as roadsides where some State Park visitors have parked illegally.

Technical problems with the bill include those that are described well in the testimony of Eileen Grant, fellow Board Member with the Friends of CT State Parks. There will continue to be ongoing, vexing issues such as having inadequate staff and enforcement agents at most places to be able to effectively patrol and control all walk-in entrances to Parks (if prohibiting walk-in visitors were a desired outcome, which often it is not at most State Parks).

Despite the technical problems with this bill, I want to thank the Committee for raising it to once again bring attention to the lack of capacity faced by overwhelmed Park managers and seasonal workers.

In 2021, over 17 million people visited State Parks -- an increase over the previous highest annual attendance mark in 2020 of ~13 million. As visitation to State Parks has increased steeply over the past few years, Park staff have steadily declined by over 50% since the mid 1980's to the current level of 83 FTEs from a high of over 200 FTEs.

As Park visitation has increased (in addition to more Parks being designated over time which is wonderful for the public), the pressures to accommodate more visitors and many competing interests continues to overwhelm inadequate staff.

These 83 Park employees and the seasonal workers they supervise are responsible for managing directly and assisting other land managers within DEEP with 110 State Parks, 32 State Forests, 92 Wildlife Management Areas, 15 Campgrounds, 6 Environmental Education Centers, 117 Boat Launches, and other public facilities included in over 400 buildings stretching across 255,000+ acres of state land.

It is unsustainable and unrealistic to continue adding more responsibilities to Park managers, even important ones like ensuring public safety on the roads and entrances adjacent to State Parks.

I'd be glad to respond to any questions you may have.