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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	Position
Raised SB 965: AN ACT ESTABLISHING A MUNICIPAL TREE REMOVAL GRANT PROGRAM.	Oppose

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.

Over the past decade or so, I Chaired the State Vegetation Management Task Force created by the Two Storms Panel, Chaired the Forests Subgroup of the Governor's Council on Climate Change, and most recently Chaired a diverse group of organizations to develop Policies on Resilient Forests for Connecticut's Future (PRFCT Future).

All of my efforts have been based upon the premise that trees and forests provide a wide variety of socioeconomic, ecosystem, and other benefits, and that we all share an important responsibility in how we steward their present and future. With a changing climate and a new normal of more intense weather events and stressors on trees, this is especially important and increasingly difficult.

SB 1003 would require the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection to establish and administer a grants program to support municipal efforts to remove trees. We do appreciate that there is a need for municipalities to dedicate funding to remove dead, diseased, and dying trees along municipal rights-of-way. However, requiring DEEP to establish a grant application process, eligibility criteria, a formula for grant awards, and administer this program would overwhelm DEEP's administrative capacity which is already extremely limited.

At the same time, there are other tree and forest priorities that DEEP currently needs to address that would be impossible if DEEP also had to respond to the various needs of communities to address dead, diseased, decaying, and dying trees. DEEP has a higher obligation, in our opinion, to protect, manage, and restore the health of existing trees, increase tree canopy coverage to provide additional benefits to communities, support investments in urban and community forestry, and help communities plan for the future with tree inventories, management plans, and many other activities.

The costs and site-specific priorities associated with maintaining healthy urban and community forests are different in every community, it would be exceptionally difficult for DEEP to develop criteria for a grants program that would address all needs fairly, and DEEP should not be tasked with this extra responsibility given that the agency already has inadequate staff to take care of their current responsibilities. I hope you will oppose this bill.

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