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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 301: AN ACT REQUIRING THE PROVISION OF ALL-TERRAIN WHEELCHAIRS AT STATE PARKS.	Support

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.

In 2021, more than 17 million people visited Connecticut's State Parks, making them our state's largest outdoor attraction by a large measure. This represented a 50% increase in attendance over the previous year, and was the highest attendance at State Parks ever recorded.

Despite soaring attendance, there are still relatively few accommodations at State Parks specifically designed to get people with mobility challenges outdoors (beyond basic Americans with Disabilities Act structural requirements at DEEP public facilities). That's why we support SB 301, which requires DEEP to provide electric all-terrain wheelchairs at 5 state parks to be available for public use by April, 2024. This requirement would hopefully be funded by \$500,000 in American Rescue Plan Act funding proposed in the Governor's Budget for FY 2024-25.

It's important to note that making these wheelchairs available to the public will have an impact on Park staff (who already have too much on their plates). Park staff would be responsible for handling the logistics of how the public can reserve wheelchairs; training people on their proper use; keeping wheelchairs charged, in good condition and stored safely; and other considerations.

We support this initiative strongly, and are advocating for additional field staff in the State Parks division to make sure there are ample staff resources to ensure the success of this important program. States like Georgia, who make all-terrain wheelchairs available at certain State Parks, utilize a partnership with a private foundation to ensure the program is well-resourced and successful.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments, and I'd be glad to respond to any questions you may have.