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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
<b>Raised SB 896:</b> AAC TREE REMOVAL ON PROPERTIES UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY & ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION.	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'm here to express appreciation to the Committee for raising SB 896, and for your ongoing efforts on behalf of trees, one of Connecticut's most important natural resources.

Over the past decade, I have 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.

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.

State Parks and Campgrounds, along with the trees that help distinguish these special places from more developed attractions, are some of Connecticut's most widely loved and visited outdoor assets. 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 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 to continue adding more responsibilities to Park managers, even important ones like ensuring that DEEP 1) communicates more effectively with the public in advance of making determinations of tree health in State Parks and campgrounds, and 2) taps most effectively into the expertise of state-licensed arborists.

According to DEEP, its 2022 Hazard Tree Mitigation Policy published in August is addressing many of the concerns identified in SB 896 and last year's legislation within available resources (as much as this is possible). DEEP states, in its report to the Environment Committee required under Section 17 (c) of Public Act 22-143, that its new policy addresses: "regular and systematic inspections based on visually identifiable tree defects, information on identifying hazardous tree defects, guidance on identifying heritage trees, requirements for documenting and storing information on all hazard tree evaluations, identified roles for arborists and other highly trained professionals when addressing heritage trees, signage and public notification, and guidance on hazard mitigation."

DEEP staff (18 so far) have attended trainings as part of the Tree Warden Association of Connecticut's Tree School, and two have attained credentials in Tree Risk Assessment Qualification from the International Society of Arboriculture. These are encouraging steps, and DEEP's new policy deserves an opportunity to show it can work.

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