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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
H.B. 6659: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.	SUPPORT

Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice-Chairs Hartley, Exum, and Paris, Ranking Members Berthel and Nuccio, and Honorable Members of the Appropriations Committee,

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.

On behalf of CFPA, I'm here in support of the Governor's Budget proposal for FY 2024-25, and include some comments on the proposed budget for the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection – in particular the recommendations related to forests, parks, and ensuring access for all to the outdoors.

We support the inclusion of \$500,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to further DEEP's ongoing investments in Connecticut's urban forests; that is, trees and forests in closest proximity to where people live and work. Trees and forests provide so many benefits to communities by filtering air and water, maintaining biodiversity, providing shade to keep cities cooler, absorbing and slowing stormwater to reduce flooding, increasing neighborhood property values, storing carbon, helping our municipalities be as resilient as possible in the face of climate change, and even keeping communities safer and healthier. Over the past few years, DEEP has dedicated funding to support grants to environmental justice communities working in partnership with UConn and the Connecticut Urban Forest Council. These grants are having a positive impact, and should continue.

We also support \$500,000 in ARPA funding to acquire electric, all-terrain wheelchairs that could be used to make State Parks and Forests more accessible to people with mobility challenges. This investment helps DEEP remove an obstacle that prevents Connecticut residents with mobility challenges from enjoying public lands sustainably. However, 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, see pages 2-4 for details). Park staff presumably 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 want to make sure that there are enough staff resources to ensure its success.

We also support the proposed addition of one Environmental Protection Operations Supervisor to the State Parks division. For several years, DEEP's two district supervisors covering the East and West of the state have been stretched too thinly, and this additional operations supervisor will help DEEP move forward more rapidly to implement important investments in State Park infrastructure.

**However, adding only one employee to the State Parks division is simply NOT ENOUGH** to make a difference in a beleaguered State Park system that has lost 41 full-time field positions over the past 20 years (and over 120 positions over the past 40 years) while attendance to State Parks continues to grow dramatically. In the early 1980's, there were over 200 full-time workers dedicated to State Park operations and maintenance. If this budget proposal is approved without adding additional State Park workers, there would be only 84 full-time workers available to steward Connecticut's parks.

DEEP's excellent but overworked field staff for State Parks are critical to the management of 110 State Parks, 29 State Forests, 17 campgrounds, 56 historic sites and other buildings, 129 boat launches, and 154 wildlife management and flood control areas stretching across over 229,000 acres. At the field level, State Park maintainers and supervisors (and the seasonal workers that they must recruit, train, and supervise every year) are doing the hard work of maintaining public facilities, making land safe for public use, and responding to many requests from visitors and DEEP's partners.

Maintaining these public lands and facilities has been quite a challenge with the explosive growth in attendance to State Parks, documented at **over 17 million visitors in 2021** (the most ever recorded by DEEP and a 50% increase over the previous high). With this rapidly growing attendance, the cost of operating and maintaining State Parks has grown, as has the toll on DEEP's State Park workers. The cost of seasonal workers has grown with minimum wage increases and a more competitive job market, and other costs such as fuel, equipment repair, etc. have also increased.

The Passport to the Parks program has been critically important to absorb some of these costs and support many operational and maintenance needs of State Parks. That's why it's so essential to keep the Passport to the Parks funding intact and dedicated to Park operations and maintenance at a time when there are already so many stressors on the State Park system. It's worth noting that the Governor's Budget projection for the Passport proposes that Park operations and maintenance expenses paid from the Passport are expected to increase significantly, while revenues will remain fairly flat. Obviously, this imbalance is not sustainable over time.

Of course, we understand that requesting a large increase in staffing for State Parks is a heavy lift. But **we ask the Committee to consider a specific request of 15 additional Park Maintainers** in addition to the Environmental Protection Operations Supervisor because the current situation is untenable and unsafe for DEEP and the public.

**State Parks should not have any Park Management Units with only 1 Park Maintainer.** Only one Park Maintainer is not safe (lots of heavy jobs across a wide area), and reliance on just one maintainer can shut-down maintenance work across thousands of acres if that single maintainer is sick, injured, retires, goes on vacation, or otherwise is unable to work for an extended time period.

- There are currently **7 Park Management Units with only 1 Maintainer** (e.g. Sleeping Giant and several others with large acreages and other challenges)
- There are also **several Park Management Units with 2 Maintainers that should have 3 or more based on high visitation** (e.g. Rocky Neck, Pachaug, Penwood, Sherwood Island).
- And Hammonasset, which is the Connecticut's most visited outdoor attraction, has **4 maintainers and used to have 6 or more.**

Below, I include specific information showing the magnitude of natural resources that are managed across 22 Park Management Units by DEEP's field staff (primarily Park Supervisors and Park Maintainers at varying levels of experience). The information summarized below in the "Resources to Manage" column is abbreviated as follows:

**P**=Park

**C**=Campground

**F**=Forest

**S**=Sites

**BL**=Boat Launch

**WM**=Wildlife Mgt & Flood Control Areas

<b>Eastern</b>					
<b>Units</b>	<b>Sup Level</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Resources to Manage</b>	<b>Staff as of 11.29.22</b>	<b>2022 Seasonals</b>
Gillette Castle	MU2	11,310	11P, 1C, 1F, 3S, 9BL, 9WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	31
Salmon River	MU3	21,238	8P, 3F, 4S, 6BL, 15WM	1 Sup, 1 Maint	9
Mashamoquet	MU3	21,225	10P, 3C, 3F, 6S, 13BL, 13WM	1 Sup, 1 Maint	18
Shenipsit	MU2	19,551	2P, 3F, 3S, 8BL, 17WM	1 Sup, 1 Maint	10
Cockaponset	MU3	18,750	11P, 1F, 2S, 6BL, 5WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	26
Hammonasset	MU3	1,096	1P, 1C, 1S, 5BL, 10WM	2 Sup, 4 Maint, 1 Sec	99
Rocky Neck	MU3	5,200	2P, 1C, 1F, 1S, 10BL, 8WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	56
Harkness	MU3	335	2P, 1S, 1WM	1 Sup, 1 Maint, 1 Ag, 1 Process	28
Pachaug	MU3	29,997	3P, 1F, 3C, 16BL, 20WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	14
Hopeville Pond	MU1	3,363	2P, 1F, 2C, 7BL, 7WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	20
Fort Trumbull	MU3	2,242	4P, 9S, 2BL, 1WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	15
<b>Totals</b>		<b>134,307</b>	<b>56P, 11 C, 3F, 30S, 82BL, 106WM</b>	<b>12 Sup, 20 Maint, 1 Ag, 1 Process, 1 Sec</b>	<b>326</b>
				<b>Total FTE: 36 (incl District Ops Supervisor)</b>	

<b>Western</b>					
<b><u>Units</u></b>	<b><u>Sup Level</u></b>	<b><u>Acres</u></b>	<b><u>Resources to Manage</u></b>	<b><u>Staff as of 11.29.22</u></b>	<b><u>2022 Seasonals</u></b>
Macedonia Brook	MU2	22,530	4P, 3F, 2C, 5S, 6BL, 6WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	23
Lake Waramaug	MU1	5,237	5P, 2F, 1C, 3BL	1 Sup, 2 Maint	18
Penwood	MU2	3,377	5P, 2F, 4S, 2BL, 14WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	17
Topsmead	MU3	10,952	4P, 3F, 1C, 2S, 6BL, 3WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	32
Peoples	MU2	20,387	0P, 7F, 1C, 3S, 4BL	1 Sup, 2 Maint	12
Burr Pond	MU1	8,200	8P, 2F, 3S, 6BL, 8WM	1 Sup, 1 Maint	17
Sherwood Island	MU3	1,200	2P, 2S, 2BL, 4WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	45
Putnam Memorial	MU3	10,446	9P, 3F, 1C, 6S, 6BL, 6WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	22
Squantz Pond	MU1	2,301	2P, 1F, 5BL, 1WM	1 Sup, 1 Maint	28
Osbornedale	MU2	2,194	3P, 2F, 2S, 2BL, 2WM	1 Sup, 2 Maint	40
Sleeping Giant	MU2	8,273	9P, 1F, 1S, 5BL, 5WM	1 Sup, 1 Maint	13
<b>Totals</b>		<b>95,097</b>	<b>51P, 6C, 26F, 27S, 47BL, 49WM</b>	<b>11 Sup, 19 Maint</b>	<b>267</b>
				<b><u>Total FTE: 31</u></b> <b>(incl District Ops Supervisor)</b>	

<b>Nature Centers</b> (those not already included above)					
<b><u>Units</u></b>		<b><u>Acres</u></b>	<b><u>Resources to Manage</u></b>	<b><u>Staff as of 11.29.22</u></b>	<b><u>2022 Seasonals</u></b>
Kellogg			2S	1 Maint, 2 Env Analyst, 1 Office	7
Dinosaur SP		82	1P	1 EE Coord, 1 Maint	12
Goodwin Forest Conservation Ctr			1S	n/a	2
<b>Totals</b>		<b>82</b>	<b>3S, 1P</b>	<b>1 EE, 2 EAs, 2 Maint</b>	<b>21</b>
				<b><u>Total FTE: 5</u></b>	

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this bill. I'd be glad to respond if you have any questions.