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2026 Conservation Agenda

Connecticut's forests, parks, and trails are essential to residents' quality of life. They strengthen environmental resilience, protect water quality, support public health, provide recreational opportunities, and contribute to the state's economy. Continued investment in conservation is critical to sustaining this legacy and ensuring Connecticut remains an outstanding place to live, work, and enjoy the outdoors.

Since 1897, the Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) has advanced a conservation agenda to protect the state's natural resources. The 2026 Conservation Agenda builds on this long tradition, looking ahead to preserve public lands, strengthen environmental stewardship, and ensure equitable access to outdoor recreation.

Reduced Federal Funding – Forestry

CFPA has operated the Master Woodland Manager (MWM) program for five years, providing landowners and forest managers with practical education and training. Since its launch, the program has served 226 participants through a mix of field-based and virtual learning. Each year, participants have access to more than 100 hours of field instruction and 40 hours of virtual programming.

While participants pay a modest fee, the program has relied heavily on support from CFPA and the U.S. Forest Service. Over five years, the program has received \$780,000 in combined funding, including two U.S. Forest Service Landscape Scale Restoration grants and matching contributions from CFPA and partners.

With long-term federal funding uncertain, CFPA requests up to \$200,000 in state support to sustain this program and ensure Connecticut landowners continue to receive guidance on sustainable forest management.

Forestry Programs

Forest conservation and sound forestry policy are foundational to CFPA's mission. CFPA urges the General Assembly to support critical DEEP forestry programs that are at risk due to potential federal funding cuts. DEEP has made significant progress in urban forestry and expanding the urban tree canopy. If federal funding is reduced, CFPA strongly encourages the legislature to prioritize state funding to maintain this work.

State Parks and Forests Master Plan

With recent investments in Passport to the Parks, additional state bonding, and the creation of the Office of Outdoor Industry and Experiences, CFPA believes the time is right for a comprehensive master plan for Connecticut's state parks and forests that includes a strong focus on visitor experience.

State parks face increasing pressures, including higher visitation, evolving recreational interests, and uncertain long-term funding. A strategic planning process would allow the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) and policymakers to proactively address these challenges, protect natural and cultural resources, and establish a clear path forward for the next five to ten years.

At a minimum, a master plan should include:

- Capital improvement plan
- Funding and revenue sustainability plan
- Management and operations plan
- Strategic action plan with measurable outcomes

The plan could be developed by individual parks or by management zones. Initial scoping should identify key characteristics—such as acreage, amenities, gates, and visitation levels—and include at least five parks to guide implementation.

Agency Staffing

CFPA supports adequate staffing levels at DEEP and the Department of Agriculture (DOAG) to ensure these agencies can fulfill their missions and deliver on legislative priorities. CFPA urges the state to prioritize the following positions:

- **Environmental Educator, Goodwin Conservation Center (Hampton):**

A full-time educator position, comparable to those at Meigs Point, Dinosaur State Park, and the Kellogg Environmental Center, to expand environmental education opportunities.

- **Survey Crews:**

Fully staffed survey crews are essential to provide statewide coverage of DEEP-managed lands, including forests, parks, scenic reserves, and wildlife management areas. Encroachments are frequently identified by staff and the public, and timely response is critical. As the steward and asset manager of these lands, DEEP must be able to quickly halt encroachments and begin rehabilitation.

Trails and Open Space Bonding

CFPA encourages continued bonding for Connecticut's trail systems and related conservation efforts. Investments in the 825-mile Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail System support the state's most popular outdoor recreation activity—hiking—according to the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

These investments also leverage substantial volunteer contributions. In 2025 alone, CFPA volunteers provided more than 18,000 hours of trail work, valued at over \$690,000. On average, every \$550 in state investment maintains one mile of Blue-Blazed Trail.

Bonding for multi-use greenways that connect communities to the Blue-Blazed System expands access, while open space bonds ensure trails and natural areas are protected for future generations.

Passport to the Parks

CFPA strongly supports maintaining the integrity of the Passport to the Parks program. Broad diversions of program funds or the creation of new exemptions—such as those based on multi-car households or specific demographics—would weaken the program and undermine its statewide benefit.

In 2024, the General Assembly made a historic investment in Passport to the Parks by updating the program’s revenue structure through the budget adjustment. This action has had a meaningful and positive impact, allowing all Connecticut residents to access state parks and forests without paying entrance fees. CFPA urges the legislature to keep the program intact so all residents can continue to enjoy Connecticut’s natural and recreational resources.

State Land Conveyances

CFPA will continue to closely monitor and carefully evaluate proposals for state land conveyances to ensure public lands are not lost or transferred in ways that diminish their environmental or community value. DEEP and DOAG are strong stewards of public lands, and CFPA will advocate for preserving these lands for their long-term environmental, recreational, and public benefits.