



Environment Committee Public Hearing – March 8, 2021
Testimony **in Support** of Governor’s Bill No 6441
AN ACT CONCERNING CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

The Connecticut Council on Soil and Water Conservation is set up by State Statute to assist the Commissioner of the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) with the coordination of soil and water conservation protection and management across the state. The Council brings together local, state, and federal agencies involved in such matters with its membership including the 5 Conservation Districts, DEEP, Dept of Agriculture, UConn Extension, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, USDA Farm Service Agency, CT Agricultural Experiment Station, and the CT Resource and Development Council. There is a similar coordinating body in every state, creating a national network of state soil and water conservation agencies providing for technical transfer of scientific knowledge and best practices across the nation.

Today I am writing in full support of Governor’s Bill No. 6441- An Act Concerning Climate Change Adaptation. This bill recognizes the important role that municipalities play in climate change adaptation and mitigation and addresses the local need for funding for implementation. It also recognizes the important ecosystem services provided by our working and natural lands as nature-based solutions to some of the biggest challenges we face.

The Connecticut Council on Soil and Water Conservation was honored to serve on two of the Governor’s Council on Climate Change (GC3) Working and Natural Lands sub-groups: 1) Agriculture and Soils and 2) Wetlands. I also participated in most of the Environmental Justice work group and sub-group meetings and currently serve on the Long Island Sound Study Environmental Justice committee. The reports generated by the GC3 Working and Natural Lands sub-groups elaborate on the ecosystem services provided by these lands and their importance to environmental justice communities.

Sea level rise and extreme storm events are well known impacts of a changing climate affecting local communities. The GC3 reports have identified other critical public health issues that will be exacerbated by climate change including food insecurity, drinking water supply quality and quantity, and extreme heat events. One thing is clear, healthy, intact ecosystems are the foundation of healthy, resilient communities. Protecting, restoring, and maintaining the ecosystem services provided by our working and natural lands is essential to community health. Municipalities are on the front line for drinking water protection, food security, stormwater management, land preservation, climate resiliency, flood prevention, and heat island reduction. This bill provides enabling authority for the necessary funding to meet these challenges.

Stormwater Authorities

Managing stormwater for quality and quantity requires the involvement of multiple town agencies and boards. Conservation districts work with them on watershed management and assist with implementation of best management practices (BMPs) aimed at reducing the impacts of stormwater runoff. BMPs include retrofitting existing stormwater systems to allow for better infiltration, reducing runoff volume and flood risks. They control runoff and erosion during construction through final site stabilization. BMPs also involve ongoing housekeeping practices like storm drain cleaning and street sweeping. They also include education and outreach programs such as healthy yards projects to reduce nutrients causing harmful algal blooms. Providing enabling legislation for stormwater authorities acknowledges the important role that municipalities play in stormwater management and provides them with a funding mechanism to implement their stormwater management plans. Funds can also be used to leverage federal funding through programs such as the EPA 319 Nonpoint Source program.

Flood and Erosion Control Boards

The Council and conservation districts have worked closely throughout the years with USDA NRCS and DEEP on flood and erosion control projects, utilizing state bonding authority to leverage federal dollars such as USDA PL 566 funding but also Army Corp of Engineers or FEMA funding. Expanding this program to include climate resiliency as part of its flood prevention and/or erosion control projects is important to providing access to federal funding opportunities. Nature-based solutions are an important component of climate resiliency. It should be noted that Flood and Erosion Control Boards are just one of the numerous municipal boards and commissions that are important for climate resiliency.

Funding open space and climate resiliency

Section 3 of this bill is especially important as it provides municipalities with an option, should they so choose, to establish a buyer's conveyance fee to fund land stewardship, climate resilience, and other environmental projects in their community. Additionally, expanding the Green Bank's mission and programs to include climate adaptation and resiliency programs will provide the state and local government additional funding options, including public/private partnerships, that are important to the development of ecosystem service markets.

The Council and conservation districts work across municipal boundaries providing technical assistance to municipalities, state agencies, farmers, and other landowners, often using watershed boundaries as a common denominator. They have been instrumental in helping municipalities leverage federal dollars from federal agencies including USDA NRCS and EPA. Creating funding programs that will improve the ability for all municipalities to provide the local match will assist in leveraging additional federal dollars. Federal agencies are more likely to fund projects that benefit multiple communities.

Local, state, and federal natural resource agencies understand that the benefits of ecosystem services, protected and maintained through land stewardship and climate resiliency projects,

do not just accrue to the municipality where the land is located. They often demonstrate the complex relationship between urban and rural communities. Examples of shared benefits can be found throughout Connecticut. The public drinking water supply for the City of Hartford is in northwestern CT and includes much of the Farmington River Watershed that extends into Massachusetts with the major reservoir located in the towns of Hartland and Barkhamsted. Ecosystem services provided by intact forests in these rural communities will ensure that this water supply system maintains both the quality and quantity of water needed to provide for all the residents in the greater Hartford area served by MDC. Flood control projects in Bloomfield protect Hartford from flooding, and nonpoint source pollution control programs in the upper reaches of the Thames River watershed improve the water quality entering Long Island Sound near New London. Our farmlands do not just produce food for the residents of the town they are in. They are an important part of the solution to advancing food security in our most distressed communities. Similarly, the air quality benefits of intact forests, especially in our southwest region, improves the quality of the entire airshed. Recognizing these interconnections and providing all municipalities access to funding tools needed will move Connecticut forward to a resilient and sustainable future.

Finally, I want to applaud the effort the GC3 for actively engaging each of the sub-groups in environmental equity discussions some of which is reflected in parts of this legislation. We often limit discussions on environmental equity to siting of pollution generators in EJ communities and/or affordable housing. The GC3 recognizes that food insecurity, clean water, drought resiliency, flooding, and inequal access to residential scale renewable energy are all challenges facing our most vulnerable residents and that these challenges will be exacerbated by climate change. Funding mechanisms that recognize that healthy communities, including EJ communities, are dependent upon healthy ecosystems and that ecosystems span across political boundaries, are greatly needed in CT.

Thank you for your consideration.

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