

Appropriations Committee

**Testimony on Governors House Bill No. 6439
Submitted by Nathan Frohling, Director of External Affairs
The Nature Conservancy
February 19, 2021**

Thank you Chairwomen Walker and Osten, Ranking Members France and Minor and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee for the opportunity to testify in support of H.B. No. 6439, An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June Thirtieth 2023, and Making Appropriations Therefor (referred to herein as Governor's Budget or Proposed Budget).

DEEP Energy Budget & Positions:

Meeting the challenges of climate change is a major priority of The Nature Conservancy and we are pleased to see the Governor and his administration make this a top priority as well. The Energy side of DEEP is critical to moving the State forward toward its climate change and related energy goals under the Global Warming Solutions Act among others. Because of the urgency and limited time we have to act on these issues, it is appropriate, even in a time of fiscal constraints, to increase the Energy side of DEEP's budget so we are pleased to see that both FY '22 and FY '23 have increases in funding and staff (increase of 12 staff).

We understand that this increase may be connected to support for the broadband initiative but if so we strongly urge that as much capacity in staff and funding be directed to support the climate and energy initiatives of DEEP including but not limited to continued development and implementation of GC-3 Report recommendations, improvements to the Integrated Resource Plan (IRP), the Comprehensive Energy Strategy (CES) and particularly the State's efforts to bolster CT's contribution to the efforts to reform ISO-NE including support for NESCOE.

Decreases for DEEP's Environmental Conservation and Quality:

We understand the need to address fiscal constraints but are very concerned with the budget cuts and 12 staff reductions for DEEP's Environmental Conservation and Environmental Quality. Budget reductions to these programs are unfortunately ones we find ourselves testifying on in many budget years. In that testimony we have expressed the importance of these programs and that remains as true now as it ever was. The Covid Pandemic has only made that clearer in how critical our environment is not only to sustaining nature but to sustaining human health and well-being. As an example of seeing the effects of prior budget cuts, I share my own observation of chronic budget cuts to DEEP's Marine Fisheries Division. I have seen how depleted this Division has become including critical aspects of the capacity they need to fulfill their mission despite heroic efforts made by the staff who remain. This affects, for example, critical data collection that has been accomplished for decades and serves as the foundation for many key

protection and management programs including the state-of-the-art Long Island Sound Blue Plan.

What makes these DEEP cuts particularly troubling this year is the very real chance that it will mean leaving the opportunity for significant federal funds on the table. The Biden Administration and new Congress are clear that stimulus and recovery funding is a priority as is spending on infrastructure in support of climate resilience and clean water among others. DEEP needs staff and capacity to help seek these federal funds, work with non-federal partners in shaping grants and projects including in helping to secure non-federal match. DEEP particularly needs to have the capacity to manage and administer funds and grants. Even at existing staff levels this basic but essential capacity does not appear to be in place.

Passport to Parks:

The Passport to the Parks program enables our State Parks Division to provide safe conditions for the millions of people who visit our parks each year, but only if the revenues generated for this program are not diverted for other purposes. We strongly urge this source of funding to remain fully dedicated to its original purpose.

Community Investment Act (CIA):

The Community Investment Act (CIA) has become an essential funding source for DEEP's Open Space Matching Grants program, as well as affordable housing, historic preservation, and farmland protection programs. It is a fantastic program and we appreciate the Governor's protection and continuing full funding for it.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment.