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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
H.B. 6439: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.	Support

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first nonprofit conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 125 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 am testifying in support of the Governor's proposed 2022-2023 Budget, in particular the investments proposed to support outdoor recreation and access to Connecticut's Parks, Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, and recreational trails through the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

2020 by any measure was a uniquely challenging year; but it was also an inspirational one. Despite closures of many indoor activities due to COVID-19, Connecticut kept its State Parks, Forests, and recreational trails open. It was inspirational to see all of the people who got outdoors over the past year despite prudent capacity-limiting actions employed at many state, municipal, and other facilities such as reduced parking, reduced group size enforcement, and other measures. These outdoor activities were fundamentally important to both physical and mental health for many thousands of people.

Although many of the reports of increased usage were anecdotal, the UConn Trails Census collected hard data that supports this significant increase. Across 20 trail sites monitored by the UConn Trails Census with infrared trail counters, they documented a **75% increase overall in trail use in 2020** (2,708,653 uses) when compared to 2019 (1,544,158 uses). This enormous increase benefitted individuals and families, but it also contributed to Connecticut's economy significantly. Talk to any outdoor recreation retailer, and they can tell you about record sales of bicycles, kayaks, and other equipment that got people outdoors in 2020 despite a backdrop of difficult economic conditions.

Trail use has boomed, and so has attendance at State Parks. Since the 2018 calendar year, due to the Passport to the Parks, there has been no parking fee charged at the gates of our state's most popular Parks. Park attendance grew by approximately 10% in both 2018 and again in 2019, and now over 11 million visitors are visiting State Parks each year. We suspect that attendance at State Parks grew once again by at least 10% in 2020. DEEP documented the attendance at Hammonasset Beach State Park swelled by 20% to 2.67 million visitors by October, 2020 compared with 2.22 million visitors year-over-year by October, 2019. Keep in mind that **this 20% increase in 2020 at Hammonasset happened despite reducing parking capacity by 50%** due to COVID for much of the year.

Overall, we are pleased that the Passport to the Parks and other critical programs that invest in Connecticut's quality of life are fully supported in the Governor's budget proposal. However, please keep in mind that there have been several changes since the Passport was launched, such as changing from a 2-year to a 3-year registration, hiring

seasonal staff at an atypical pace due to the pandemic, and other factors. As a relatively young and evolving successful program, the Passport deserves time to reach its full capacity.

However, there are a few related issues that we put forward for your consideration:

- The Passport to the Parks is essential to ensure that State Parks are well-maintained, safe, and sustainably funded. However, it's important to know that there are costs of doing business that, as they grow, will continue to cut into the ability of the Passport to achieve its goals system-wide. For example, the minimum wage for Connecticut is increasing and that will make it more expensive for DEEP to offer competitive rates to hire top-flight lifeguards, park maintainers, and other park workers. Also, direct expenses such as the salaries of seasonal workers paid for by the Passport are inflated (we believe unfairly) by fringe benefits which many seasonal employees don't even benefit from. For some permanent full-time salaries that are supported by the Passport, fringe benefits can add to the overall position cost by over 100%. If the Committee could work with the Administration to shift these fringe costs from the Passport to the Comptroller's Office (where DEEP positions supported by the General Fund are paid for), this would help simplify budgeting for the Department and ensure that the Passport funds go much further to meet the many and increasing needs of the Parks.
- We are concerned about the decreases in the budget proposed for the Environmental Conservation line-item in both FY 2022 and 2023. A decrease of \$612,820 below the baseline of \$5,056,026 is proposed in FY 2022, and a decrease of \$840,235 below the baseline of \$5,206,573 is proposed in FY 2023. There doesn't seem to be a justification given in the budget for these proposed decreases and without further information, it's hard to understand the implications or rationale for these proposed budget cuts.
- Just as there has been an increase in Park and Trail usage this last year, there has also been an increase in the need for law enforcement actions by environmental conservation officers (EnCons). As of October, 2020 there had been 10,184 calls for service from EnCons. This represented a 225% increase over October, 2019 where there had been only 3,328 calls for service in Parks. If there are ways to increase resources for EnCons, it would help to both make visitors to Parks, Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, and trails safer, and help with other regulatory enforcement actions that DEEP takes.
- DEEP is struggling to efficiently utilize and administer federal matching grant programs and leverage public-private partnerships. It is unclear whether this is due to inadequate staff resources to administer programs, overly cumbersome internal processes, inefficiencies in working with other state agencies on contracting, all of the above, or perhaps for other reasons, but it is a problem (not a new one) that needs to be fixed. The result is that DEEP at times appears hesitant to apply for, receive, and utilize additional federal funds that could complement DEEP priorities and make a big difference to our state. For example, thanks to the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act by Congress, we anticipate Connecticut will be eligible to receive another \$4-5 million/year from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. We have to make sure that these funds are utilized, especially when existing state resources for land conservation are inadequate but could be leveraged through an existing DEEP program. If additional attention from your Committee can help make a difference on this issue, we'd appreciate it.

Thanks for the opportunity to testify, and I would be glad to respond to any questions you may have.