

Environment Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-5229

AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE EELGRASS

Title: WORKING GROUP.

Vote Date: 3/15/2024

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/8/2024

File No.:

***Disclaimer:** The following JOINT FAVORABLE Report is prepared for the benefit of the members of the General Assembly, solely for purposes of information, summarization and explanation and does not represent the intent of the General Assembly or either chamber thereof for any purpose.*

SPONSORS OF BILL:

Environment Committee
Rep. Aundre Bumgardner, 41st Dist.
Rep. Joseph P. Gresko, 121st Dist.
Sen. Heather S. Somers, 18th Dist.
Rep. Christine Palm, 36th Dist.
Sen. Jan Hochadel, 13th Dist.
Rep. Patricia A. Dillon, 92nd Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

Eelgrass is a species of seagrasses which is common in Long Island Sound. The grass serves many ecological purposes, including acting as feeding grounds for many aquatic wildlife, limiting coastal erosion by fixing sediment in place, and filtering water of pollutants and storing carbon dioxide to improve water quality. This bill seeks to bring CT into line with neighboring states by establishing a central figure to coordinate efforts to restore eelgrass areas.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

The language changed reference of "eelgrass beds" to "eelgrass meadows".

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Katie Dykes, Commissioner, Department of Energy & Environmental Protection

DEEP recognizes the importance eelgrass has in maintaining a healthy ecosystem in Long Island Sound. DEEP has worked to manage eelgrass and other aquatic vegetation through regulatory restoration and research programs. DEEP plans on collaborating with the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Aquaculture and the University of Connecticut to serve as the Connecticut Seagrass Coordinator.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Nathan Frohling, Director of External Affairs, The Nature Conservancy of Connecticut

The testifier states the bill is based on the report of February 2024 Eelgrass Working group, which they support. The Conservancy's mission is to conserve the lands and waters and it is their belief eelgrass is a highly important plant species. They believe it is important as a habitat and as an indicator of ecological health. The Long Island Sound Study wants to extend eelgrass into Long Island Sound by 4,061 acres by 2035; based on surveys that goal is behind schedule.

Bill Lucey, Long Island Soundkeeper, Save the Sound

As a member of the Eel Grass Task Force who prepared the recommendations for this bill, the testifier is concerned about the estimated 10% remaining eelgrass relative to historical levels. They believe the recommendations are common sense, but more work is necessary. There is currently a coordinator in New York for eelgrass and it is their belief we need one in Connecticut. They believe funding from the EPA is needed, but there are additional restoration funds from private foundations and trustee councils; the future coordination of these groups is essential.

William Hyatt, Vice-Chair, Connecticut Fisheries Advisory Council

The Council believes eelgrass has declined markedly due to pollution, disturbance, and increasing amounts of fine sediments in nearshore waters. As an important fish habitat and feeding area, eelgrass is essential in the food web of our coastal waters. They believe the establishment of an eelgrass working group helped bring to light what steps are needed next; assigning a person as Seagrass Coordinator by DEEP and DoAG is an action that will ensure continued progress.

Emma Kaye, Equity Chair, Sustainable Fairfield Task Force

The task force states the bill is made from recommendations from the Eel Grass Task Force who comprise of regulators, shellfish growers, students, research scientists, and state and federal aquaculture professionals. They believe a statewide Seagrass Coordinator along side the NY Seagrass Coordinator will address the 90% decline of eel grass meadows in Long Island Sound.

MaryEllen Mateleska, Senior Director, Mystic Aquarium

Mystic Aquarium states seagrass meadow habitats play a vital roll in foraging grounds for fish and invertebrates; thriving eelgrass meadows trap sediment and mitigate wave energy during storms. This bill represents a collaborative effort to address the alarming 90% decline of eelgrass meadows in Long Island Sound. They support the bill but would recommend changing the terminology from eelgrass "beds" to eelgrass "meadows" to accurately convey these natural, wild habitats, holding the potential to enhance public perception and fosters a stronger sense of urgency.

Craig Tobias, Professor, University of Connecticut, Director, CTNERR

As a professor of marine science at the University of Connecticut, the Professor has conducted coastal research for over 30 years. Their research has found eelgrass stabilizes the coastal ecosystems which benefit the State of Connecticut. The US environmental Protection Agency and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration estimate that the waters of Long Island Sound produce an economic value annually of 4-5 billion dollars. It is

their belief that preservation of existing eelgrass beds and restoring them is essential, to which end the creation of the position of Connecticut Seagrass Coordinator is critical to rehabilitating this ecosystem.

Mackenzie Caise

As a sophomore at Ledyard High School who is currently enrolled in Marine Science, the testifier is an active member of the NOSB team who believe that the eelgrass habitats should be preserved and restored.

Jason Patlis, President & CEO, The Maritime Aquarium

As an institution committed to building a resilient Long Island Sound, the Aquarium is appreciative of the efforts to preserve and restore eelgrass across the state. They state eelgrass provides a diverse array of species habitat and important ecosystem functions that benefit the coastal communities. The Aquarium believes that due to many human impacts, the remaining eelgrass in the Sound is found in the furthest east harbors of Connecticut. Restoring eelgrass acreage could revitalize ecosystems throughout Long Island Sound and impact the state's coastal economy. They conclude by stating that without substantial collaboration, coordination, and action our goal of establishing regional ecosystem-based solutions cannot be achieved.

**The following submitted testimony on the importance of eelgrass in the ecosystem:
Katherine Allison, Kevin Banach, Lynne Bonnett, Jamie Coss, Joanna deBear, Douglas
Feldman, Diane Hoffman, Sharon Huttner, Kelly Kennedy, Alelheid Koepfer, Donna
Lavoilette, Leslie Lee, Anne Mazzone, Shirley McCarthy, Thomas Olson, Robb
Sauerhoff, Ireme Skrybailo, Anthony Stagnitta, Mary Stevens, Nan Wisensale and
Allison Zyla.**

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None Expressed.

Reported by: Pamela Bianca

Date: March 28th, 2024