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

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
<b>Raised S.B. 887:</b> AN ACT AUTHORIZING AND ADJUSTING BONDS OF THE STATE FOR CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS, TRANSPORTATION, AND OTHER PURPOSES.	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.

I am testifying today in support of SB 887, “An Act Authorizing and Adjusting Bonds of the State for Capital Improvements, Transportation, and other purposes.”

There are four bonding priorities in SB 887 that are critically important to Connecticut’s recreational economy, Connecticut’s natural resources, and the health of Connecticut’s citizens:

- CT Recreational Trails & Greenways: support the Governor’s Budget recommended level of \$3 million in both FY 2022 and FY 2023 respectively [**Support Section 61**].
- Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition/Urban Green and Community Garden: support DEEP’s requested level of \$10 million in both 2022 and 2023 [**Support Increase of \$5 million to both Section 13(b)1 and Section 32(b)1**].
- Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust: support DEEP’s requested level of \$10 million in both 2022 and 2023. [**Add to SB 887, currently not included**]
- State Park Infrastructure Investments: support DEEP’s requested level of \$41 million in 2022 and \$44 million in 2023 [**\$15 million is included only in 2023 in Section 21(e)1**].

Although we support all of these bonding priorities, I am focusing my testimony on the FY 2022-23 Governor’s Budget recommended bonding level for the DEEP Recreational Trails & Greenways Program at \$3 million in each year. This program is essential to Connecticut for several reasons:

**Trails bring economic activity to communities**

In 2019, outdoor recreation in Connecticut contributed \$3.7 billion to our GDP, \$2 billion in private sector wages and salaries, and supported over 49,000 Connecticut jobs ([U.S Dept of Commerce: ORSA](#)). Investment in trails is an economic force multiplier.

**People are using trails more than ever**

According to the UConn CT Trails Census, in 2020, trail use statewide increased by an estimated 38% when compared to 2019. Similarly, visitation to State Parks, Forests, and Wildlife Management Areas has been booming, and we expect this high outdoor recreation involvement to continue. Connecticut leads the nation every year in the number of trails events held on CT Trails Day weekend. One of the reasons, of course, is the public’s great interest in exploring the state through its trails.

### **There is significant need for trails funding**

This program has been out of bond funding since early 2019 when it granted its last \$3.17 million. More than \$12 million in funding requests had been submitted in this last grants round, and more than \$4 million in highly-ranked project proposals could not be funded at the time.

### **Trails are an important investment for the future**

Trails are one of the best ways that bond funds can be invested. Recreational trails for hiking, running, biking, equestrian, and other uses attract and sustain families and businesses, create healthy communities, and foster a high quality of life.

### **Trails are one of the best ways to connect to open space/recreation lands**

Connecticut's statutory goal is to protect 21% of Connecticut's land (673,210 acres) as open space by the year 2023. Eleven percent of this open space is to be owned by municipalities, private non-profit land conservation organizations, and water companies. Ten percent of this open space is to be owned by the State as State Parks, Forests, and Wildlife Management Areas. The privately owned open space lands are primarily acquired with support from the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition (OSWA) program, and State lands are primarily acquired with support from the Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Fund (RNHT Fund).

### **Need to pick up the pace to meet Connecticut's 21% Open Space Goal**

Just two years away from 2023, we are only at ~76% of our statewide open space goal, and the levels of funding in both OSWA and the RNHT Fund have been inadequate to increase the pace necessary to even meet current needs. This year, the OSWA program received 37 applications totaling \$25 million in requests. Unfortunately, DEEP only had \$7.5 million available and consequently was unable to either fund or fully fund the best applications. Similarly, there are approximately 150 properties with willing sellers that have been identified by DEEP as ideal to acquire as State Parks, Forests, or Wildlife Management Areas. None of these acquisitions are possible without additional bonding. This is why we recommend increasing the bonding recommendation for OSWA to its fully authorized level of \$10 million/year, and also recommend inserting the DEEP request of \$10 million/year for the RNHT Fund.

### **People are flocking to State Parks which should be accessible to all**

We also believe a significant investment in State Park infrastructure is necessary to ensure facilities are accessible and ADA compliant to meet the needs of a public visiting State Parks at levels never before seen. As part of this investment, we think it is prudent to have dedicated funding that will help harden DEEP's shoreline and inland facilities in the face of more intense storms and sea level rise expected with our changing climate.

### **Protecting land from conversion is important to be resilient in light of a changing climate**

Although it isn't the primary focus of this testimony, CFPA also supports the \$30 million in SB 887 which would provide for a resilience grant and loan pilot program that could make important investments in green infrastructure as well as coastal and inland resiliency for Connecticut.

I encourage you to support SB 887 with emphasis on its TOP priorities – bonding for Trails, Open Space, and Parks – to ensure Connecticut is a special place for people to live, work, and play today, and remains that way for future generations to enjoy. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important bill.