

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony on Raised House Bill No. 5503
Environment Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Esq., Executive Director
Connecticut Land Conservation Council
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Senator Kennedy, Senator Miner, Representative Demicco and Members of the Environment Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) regarding **Raised House Bill No. 5503, An Act Concerning Lake Authorities and Combating Invasive Plant and Animal Species**. We thank the Environment Committee and Representative Harding for seeking to address the very serious problem of invasive species proliferation in our state's environment. While we are fully supportive of this effort, CLCC has concerns about using Community Investment Act (CIA) funds for this purpose.

As the state's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, including its 137+/- land trusts, the Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) advocates for land conservation, stewardship and funding, and works to ensure the long-term strength and viability of the land conservation community in Connecticut.

The CIA was enacted to fund four specific land use programs which support the economy and create jobs. Enacted with tremendous bipartisan support in 2005 to address the social and environmental impacts of suburban sprawl, the CIA provides increased funding for state programs for open space, farmland/dairy production, historic properties and affordable housing. Funded by a surcharge on recording fees, the CIA has benefited the economic well-being and overall quality of life in virtually every town in Connecticut.

While we strongly agree that invasive species pose a serious and growing threat to lakes, as well as other aquatic and terrestrial environments, throughout the state, we respectfully offer the following concerns with respect to using CIA funds to address this problem:

The four CIA sectors are all operating with less funds, due to continuous cuts and sweeps of the fund.

The 2016 budget included a sweep of \$1M for CIA, divided proportionately among the four sectors. For DEEP's CIA account that meant an additional \$250,000 cut. This cut was on top of the \$6M taken as part of the Deficit Mitigation Plan in 2015 and the 50% cut implemented as part of the 2015 biennium budget. We are concerned that adding another CIA-funded program, no matter how worthy, sets a dangerous precedent for future dilution of the fund.

The proposal would divert funds from DEEP's Open Space Grant Program.

The CIA is the only consistent source of funding for the state's Open Space & Watershed Land Acquisition Grant (OSWA) program – the state's matching grant program for land trusts, towns and water companies seeking to conserve open space. Since its inception, the OSWA program has provided over \$125 million to support the acquisition of 500 properties totaling over 32,000 acres in 135



communities. We are concerned that HB 5503 would result in further reduction in the amount of dollars available for these critical community open space purchases.

DEEP is already stretched thin with scarce, if any, resources to administer another grant program.

The cumulative annual cuts to DEEP have severely undermined the agency's ability to implement core programs and undertake key functions. In the current fiscal year, the agency's budget was cut by an additional 14%, with another 10% reduction proposed for next fiscal year. Budget cuts in previous years have significantly reduced staffing for DEEP's environmental and conservation programs including a 20% reduction in staff over the last 10 years. Without additional staff, we are concerned about DEEP's capacity to implement another grant program.

As we discussed with Representative Harding, we would welcome the opportunity to continue this dialogue and assist him and members of the Environment Committee in exploring alternative ideas to combat the very serious problem of invasive species control and management that impacts our state's land, water and other natural resources.

On behalf of the Connecticut Land Conservation Council, I thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have and/or provide additional information about the wonderful conservation work undertaken every day by our state's land trust community.