

CONNECTICUT Land Conservation Council

Testimony on House Bill No. 5291 and Senate Bill No. 243
Environment Committee
Submitted by Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director
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Co-Chairs Cohen and Gresko, Vice-Chairs Slap and Palm, Ranking Members Miner and Harding, and members of the Environment Committee:

The Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC) is the state's umbrella organization for the land conservation community, including its ~130 land trusts. We advocate for land conservation, stewardship and funding, and work to ensure the long-term strength and viability of Connecticut's land conservation community.

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony in support of **House Bill No. 5291, An Act Authorizing Bonding for Bikeways, Greenways and Recreational Trails** and **Senate Bill No. 243, An Act Concerning Climate-Smart Agricultural Practices**.

CLCC supports HB 5291 which would increase the bond authorization for CT DEEP's Recreational Trails and Greenways Grants Program (RTP) to \$6 million. This authorization is consistent with the bonding level of \$3 million/year for the program recommended in both the Governor's Biennial Budget for FY 2022 – 2023 and proposed Budget Adjustments for FY 2023.

RTP grant funds may be used for the construction of new trails; maintenance and restoration of existing trails; remediation of trails for accessibility by persons with disabilities; purchase/lease of trail construction and maintenance equipment; acquisition of land or easements for trails and trail corridors; and operation of relevant outdoor educational programs. As a matching grant program, it leverages investments from public and private sources into these important community projects.

The demand for RTP grant monies far exceeds the availability of funds, leaving many worthy projects tabled without financial assistance. And this demand continues to increase. In 2021, DEEP received an unprecedented 65 RTP applications totaling over \$22 million in project costs, for which the agency had just \$3 million to spend.

Why do we need this grant program? Just ask your local land trust and their community partners. When a land trust or municipality acquires land for conservation, it is not the end of the process; it is just the beginning. Land conservation is as much about the stewardship and management of the property as it is about acquiring and protecting it to begin with.

What does this mean? A lot of dirty work: implementing management plans to ensure a balance between protection of the land and its usage for public enjoyment; grooming existing trails, constructing new ones, maintaining structures, and ensuring that the land is as accessible as possible for all to enjoy. And every land trust will tell you that it is worth it.



Trails connect people to the land and to each other; they attract tourists to local businesses; they enhance property values; and they provide opportunities to stay physically and mentally healthy. With a growing demand for equitable access to the outdoors and an unprecedented increase in the public's use of trails – trends that are expected to continue – we ask the committee to support this much needed level of investment into Connecticut's outdoor recreation infrastructure.

CLCC supports SB 243 which recognizes the importance of working and natural lands to Connecticut's climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Consistent with recommendations from The Governor's Council on Climate Change Phase 1 Report: Near-Term Actions (January 2021) as well as Governor's Executive Order No. 21-3 (December 2021), SB 243 enhances the CT Department of Agriculture's Farmland Restoration Grant Program by supporting farmers who implement climate-smart agricultural and forestry practices. These best management practices are intended to make farms more resilient to current and anticipated impacts of climate change, reduce the production of greenhouse gas emissions and, through improved soil conditions, serve as critical carbon sinks, among other outcomes that mitigate climate change while improving agricultural productivity. The bill expands the availability of technical assistance services to farmers and prioritizes funding for socially disadvantaged producers (including those who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and new and beginning farmers. We ask the committee to support SB 243 which is another step in the right direction in the state's efforts to address the climate crisis.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our comments, and for all you do. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.