

Hurd State Park,
East Hampton

PROTECTING OPEN SPACE

WHY IS OPEN SPACE IMPORTANT?

Open space land is, in many ways, the trademark of Connecticut. Our state's beautiful and diverse landscape contributes to our prosperity, public health and high quality of life. Open space protects our natural resources, like clean drinking water and many fragile ecosystems. Farms, forests and beaches provide recreation for residents and draw tourism dollars into our communities. Further economic benefits were noted in a study conducted by UConn's Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis that quantified approximately 9,000 jobs and \$1 billion annually through the protection of open space lands associated with state parks.

In 1999, Connecticut set a goal of preserving 21% of its land as protected open space by 2023, with at least 10% of that land owned by the state and the rest owned by municipalities, land conservation organizations, and water companies. While a 2010 report indicated that the state was 73% of the way towards the goal, in 2013 the state protected only 1,068 acres — 4,932 acres less than what needs to be protected annually in order to reach the 2023 benchmark.

As the economy continues to improve, there will be mounting pressure to increase development and land protection efforts will become more expensive as a result. Connecticut can and must take several specific steps now to keep its commitment to acquiring and preserving open space in 2015 and beyond.

HOW DOES THE STATE INCREASE ITS OPEN SPACE?

The state has two primary programs run by DEEP to acquire or help acquire new open space lands:

1. The Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program

The Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program allows the Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) to purchase lands for preservation by the State. Lands acquired through the Program must provide high quality recreational, conservation or ecological values. The lands DEEP acquires are added to Connecticut's system of state forests, parks and open space and that counts towards the state-owned portion of the 2023 open space goal.

2. The Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program

The Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program provides grant funding to municipalities, nonprofit land organizations, and water companies to help them obtain lands for open space and water supply protection. This program is designed to enable towns and nonprofit land organizations to help Connecticut meet its open space preservation goals.

Connecticut can and must keep its commitment to acquiring and preserving open space in 2015.



PROTECTING OPEN SPACE *continued*

Despite support for preservation from the Governor and legislators on both sides of the aisle, Connecticut ranks behind its neighbors in the percentage of state lands preserved for open space.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Protect Funding

This is an important year for Connecticut and its efforts to increase protected open space land. The Community Investment Act (CIA), created in 2005 and funded by a \$40 surcharge on document recording fees collected by municipal clerks across the state, provides approximately \$5 million annually to the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program.

Unfortunately, the Governor's proposed FY 16-17 budget currently diverts over \$40 million from the CIA, nearly emptying the account. The diversion of these important monies will be part of this year's budget debate in the legislature.

Increase Access to Non-State Grants

In addition to protecting the CIA, the state should eliminate the 70% cap on federal and state matching grants for open space and agricultural land preservation as required by 7-131g(c) in the Connecticut General Statutes.

Mandating that municipalities and land organizations trying to protect conservation lands raise at least 30% of the funds from non-state or federal sources is a huge, sometimes prohibitive burden, especially in less affluent communities lacking municipal funds or local land trusts incapable of covering the gap.

The statute should be changed now so our land trusts and municipalities can stop turning down federal grant money and help our state achieve the 21% state land preservation goal by 2023.

In 2015, the General Assembly is considering a bill that will remove this 70% cap on state and federal matching grants for open space and agricultural land preservation.

For more information
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