

The Habitat

A newsletter of the Connecticut Association of
Conservation & Inland Wetlands Commissions, Inc.

Spring 2026
volume 38 number 1



CACIWC's 2025 Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference Attracts Near Record Attendance!



Keynote speaker James O'Donnell, PhD.
Photo by Jeff Mills.

The CACIWC Board of Directors again extends their appreciation to all our members and other attendees who were able to participate in our **48th Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference**. This conference, held on Saturday, November 15, 2025, at our new venue, **Courtyard by Marriott Hartford Cromwell** in Cromwell, Connecticut. The conference attracted one of the highest number of people hoping to attend, resulting in the formation of waiting list. To avoid disappointment, please be certain to register early this year!

CACIWC was pleased to welcome our two keynote speakers, **James O'Donnell, PhD, University of Connecticut Professor of Marine Sciences and Executive Director of the Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation (CIRCA)**, along with **State Representative Mary Mushinsky**.

Our first keynote speaker, Dr. O'Donnell provided the latest measurement and modelling data in his presentation entitled **"Update on the Connecticut Climate Report."**

conference, continued on page 4

Ongoing Efforts to Protect Riparian Areas in Connecticut

While many environmental groups worked closely with *Rivers Alliance of Connecticut* to strengthen protection of riparian areas in Connecticut, no member of the Connecticut General Assembly has been more active in working to develop legislation to ensure the protection of these areas than our second 2025 conference keynote speaker **State Representative Mary Mushinsky** (85th House District, D). She worked to develop and cosponsor several bills including Special House Bill SHB 7174, that became Special Act 25-12, *An Act Concerning Riparian Areas*, which called for the development of a special legislative task force known as the **Working Group on Riparian Buffers**.

When the working group was formed in October 2025, Representative Mushinsky served as the Co-Chair along with **Representative Mark Anderson** (62nd House District, R), both members of the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA) Environment Committee.

riperian, continued on page 12



Keynote speaker Rep. Mary Mushinsky.
Photo by Jeff Mills.

Save the Date!

Our next Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference will be held on **Saturday, November 14, 2026**. Please watch our website and the next issue of *The Habitat* for additional updates!

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www.caciwc.org

CACIWC News Briefings

As we began preparations for this Spring issue of *The Habitat*, the CACIWC Board of Directors was still receiving positive comments on our 2025 annual conference, the 48th Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference. We learned that focus of our two keynote speaker presentations, both efforts to understand the rate and impact of climate change and approaches to preserve the critical riparian areas along our streams, rivers, and lakes helped to inspire many of our member commissions to continue their important work. (*Please see both cover story articles.*)

In other news:

1. In response to suggestions from our 2025 conference, we are selecting workshop topics and speakers for our 49th Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference, now scheduled for Saturday, November 14, 2026. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any additional suggestions for speakers and workshops at AnnualMtg@caciwc.org. Watch our website for the additional detailed conference news at www.caciwc.org.

2. Although expenses for our conference and publication have continued to grow, the Board of Directors have again decided not to increase our CACIWC membership dues for our 2026-27 fiscal year starting on July 1, 2026, to help limit your yearly expenses. We will again offer a substantial discount on the annual conference registration fee for our commissioners. Follow our reminders to links for both the 2026-27 online and mail-in membership renewal forms on our website: www.caciwc.org.

3. Please continue to stay in touch with us with your recommendations for workshop topics and articles in *The Habitat* at: board@caciwc.org.

Thank you for all your efforts protecting habitats within your community!

Alan J. Siniscalchi, President
CACIWC 🍄

In This Issue

PAGE

CACIWC News	2
Updates on Endangered, Threatened and Special Concern Species in CT	3
New DEEP Reporting Form	14
CT River Watershed Webinars	16

Updates on Endangered, Threatened and Special Concern Species in Connecticut

As most of our readers know, CACIWC has been working closely with the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) Wildlife Division to raise awareness of endangered, threatened and species of special concern and their habitats. Many of our Conservation Commission members closely followed the work of the DEEP Wildlife Division in protecting these species and promoted these efforts among the residents of their communities. Some conservation commissions have also participated in surveys along with data and other findings obtained from local natural resource inventories and other activities with the DEEP Wildlife Division.

The Connecticut Endangered Species Act, passed in 1989, recognizes the importance of our state's plant and animal populations and the need to protect them from threats that could lead to their extinction. The overall goal of the legislation is to conserve, protect, restore and enhance any endangered or threatened species and their essential habitat. Species are listed according to their level of risk, and their status is reviewed every five years.

CT DEEP is required to review the designation of species as endangered, threatened, or of special concern to determine whether species should be added or removed from Connecticut's List of Endangered, Threatened and Special Concern Species, or, if necessary, change the designation from one category to another. DEEP has completed the latest review and is providing a [summary of the proposed changes to the State Endangered Species List](#) (DEEP Regulations Sections 26-306-4, 26-306-5, and 26-306-6).

Please also see the following useful links provided by the CT DEEP Wildlife Division:

[Connecticut General Statutes \(CGS\) Section 26-303 2015 Endangered, Threatened, and Special Concern Species List](#)

[Summary of Recent Changes to the 2015 State Endangered Species List](#)

[Endangered, Threatened, and Special Concern Species Listed by Taxonomic Group](#)

[Endangered Threatened and Special Concern Species by County](#)

[State Listed Plants and Natural Communities by Town](#)

[Contribute Data to the Natural Diversity Data Base \(NDDB\)](#)

[Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan](#)

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conference, continued from page 1

James O'Donnell is a physical oceanographer. He studies the physical processes that determine the circulation and transport of materials in the coastal ocean. He earned a BSc. (Hons) in Applied Physics from Strathclyde University in Scotland, and a MS and PhD in Oceanography from the University of Delaware. After two years as a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics at Cambridge University, England, Jim joined the faculty of the University of Connecticut in 1987 and was appointed Professor in 1999. He was elected to the Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering in 2009 and was appointed to be Executive Director of the Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation (CIRCA) in 2014.

In his presentation, Dr. O'Donnell focused on updating the audience on climate change data, sea level rise along with current thoughts on impacts to anticipate.

The major points of his presentation included:

- Expect higher maximum and minimum daily temperatures during all seasons, and across the State in the future.
- Daily minimum temperatures exhibit materially higher changes by mid-century and through to the end of the century. Nights may therefore become less reliable in dissipating heat stress.
- Projected global climate impact projections conducted by the World Climate Research Programme (WCRP) including the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project Phase 6 (CMIP6) cannot yet provide actionable evidence to guide interventions against extreme wind and precipitation at the sub-state scale. Regional future estimates, with their spatial uncertainty, and historical regionally averaged estimates remain the best available guidance.
- The upper bound of likely sea-level-rise in Long Island Sound (LIS) by 2050 remains at 20 inches or almost two feet. This predicted sea-level-rise in LIS becomes increasingly likely in subsequent decades. These changes have practical implications for Connecticut habitats and communities.
- Small changes to climate means (temperature: ~ 6.6 °F by 2100, sea level: 20" by 2050) significantly alter the frequency of extremes.

These include:

- Increased frequency of severe heat stress hazards by up to an order of magnitude.
- Increased precipitation-driven flooding (though where, when and by how much remains uncertain).
- Increased extent, depth and frequency of storm-induced coastal flooding in CT towns. By 2100, potential flooding due only to particularly high tides.

Jim O'Donnell generously responded to questions at the end of his presentation and during a break.

The second keynote speaker panel was **State Representative Mary Mushinsky**.

Mary Mushinsky was first elected to the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1980 on a platform of environmental activism, consumer advocacy and improved energy policies. She currently holds the leadership position of Assistant Deputy Speaker Pro Tempore. Mary has continued to be a major proponent for stronger legislation in all these important areas.

conference, continued on page 5



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Downtown Danbury Streetscape
Renaissance Project

conference, continued from page 4

Mary has held various other leadership positions including co-chair of the legislature's bipartisan Program Review and Investigations Committee, specializing in preparing workforce for a changing economy, retraining older and long-term unemployed workers, apprenticeships, and improving efficiency of state programs. The committee spotlighted and expanded the state's most successful apprenticeship program, Platform to Employment. Mary previously served as co-chair of the legislature's Select Committee on Children for ten years and passed the state's anti-bullying law. She is the recipient of numerous awards for adolescent pregnancy prevention and reduction of child poverty.

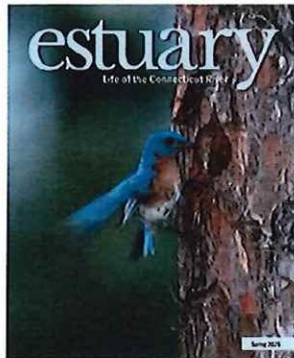
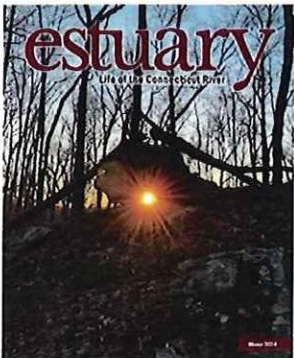
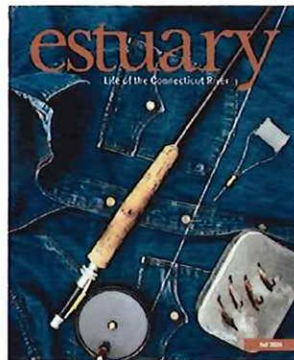
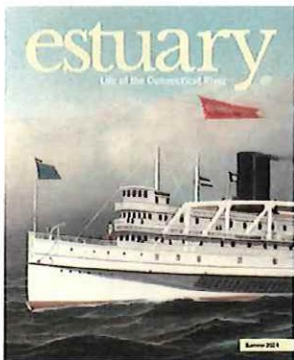
She also served for six years as co-chair of the legislature's Environment Committee. A biologist by training, Mary has been the chief proponent in the Connecticut legislature of major environmental legislation enacted during the 1980s and 1990s, including mandatory recycling, packaging reduction, open-space preservation, global warming mitigation and endangered species protection laws. Mary has continued to be a strong supporter of important environmental legislation in Connecticut.

Mary served as a member of the Commission on Enhancing Agency Outcomes and the Results-Based Accountability Working Group to achieve greater efficiencies in taxpayer funded programs, as well as the Peak Oil Caucus to reduce the impact of high oil prices on residents and businesses. She currently serves on the Manufacturing Caucus and the Sportsmen's Caucus.

In Wallingford, Mary initiated and serves as co-chair of the Quinnipiac River Linear Trail Advisory Committee, which works with local, state and federal officials and the community to expand the pedestrian/bicycle trail. She also served on the Wallingford Energy Conservation Commission, which promoted the energy audit and energy management recommendations now implemented by the Town of Wallingford school system. Mary is a member and legislative liaison for the Coalition for a Better Wallingford, which seeks to reduce drug and alcohol abuse.

Representative Mushinsky, who lives in Wallingford with her husband Martin J. Waters and has two adult
conference, continued on page 6

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conference, continued from page 5

sons, Martin and Edward Waters, will prepare an article for a future issue of *The Habitat*.

A summary of Mary's presentation can be found in a separate article entitled, ***Ongoing Efforts to Protect Riparian Areas in Connecticut***, also starting on the front cover page of this issue of *The Habitat*.

Workshops

Following the presentations from our two keynote speakers, our 2025 annual conference proceeded to our twelve workshops, organized in four tracks designed for both new and experienced conservation and inland wetlands commissions and their staff. These four tracks included several key focus areas: *Track A. Protecting Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SCCN)*, *B. Inland Wetlands Law and Regulation*; *C. Riparian Ecology & Climate Impacts*; and *Track D. Assisting Commissioners with New Tools & Updated Programs*.

Three workshops of interest to Connecticut commissions were scheduled in Track A, entitled, *Protecting Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SCCN)*.

The first track A workshop, "**Municipal environmental stewardship: Working together to conserve the secretive eastern spadefoot**" "**Update on Invasive Aquatic Plants in CT including Hydrilla**," was presented by Hank Gruner, Herpetologist, Member of the Andover Conservation Commission, & retired Vice President of Programs, CT Science Center, and Dennis Quinn, Herpetologist & Owner of Quinn Ecological, LLC.

The presenters described how the state-endangered eastern spadefoot is among New England's rarest

amphibians. In Connecticut, this unique frog is currently found in only nine towns, with a historic decline in at least a half dozen additional towns. Core populations are associated with sandy soils in low-lying areas within the Quinebaug River valley in eastern Connecticut and the northern Connecticut River valley in Hartford Country. These regions are experiencing significant land-use changes with the expansion of large-scale commercial development and solar fields. These developments present local commissions with a complexity of environmental challenges, including, the protection of species of greatest conservation need, wetlands, and other critical habitats.

The workshop was applicable to conservation commission and inland wetland commission members and provided information on: the ecology of the eastern spadefoot, identifying and mapping areas with suitable surficial geology, identifying potential ephemeral breeding wetlands during site reviews, and conservation recommendations.

**Attendance at this workshop was limited to commissioners & staff from these 17 towns: Brooklyn, Canterbury, East Windsor, Ellington, Enfield, Griswold, Lisbon, Manchester, North Stonington, Plainfield, Preston, Somers, South Windsor, Sterling, Suffield, Windsor, & Voluntown.*

The second track A workshop, "**Implementation of Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan: CACIWC's Essential Role, Part 1**" was presented by Brian Hess, Wildlife Biologist - Wildlife Diversity Program, CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), Kevin Burgio, Wildlife Biologist - Terwilliger Consulting, Inc., Katy Bischoff, PhD student, UConn, & Hank Gruner, Herpetologist & Andover Conservation Commission member.

They described how Connecticut's 2025 Wildlife Action Plan identifies priority actions to address issues facing Connecticut's native fish, wildlife and habitats for the next 10 years. Involvement from partners throughout the state is crucial to ensure that key actions in the 2025 Plan are implemented. Connecticut's municipalities, particularly their Conservation and Inland Wetland Commissions, are uniquely positioned to facilitate conservation actions at local levels. Additionally, the Plan can

conference, continued on page 7



Workshop A1 speaker Hank Gruner, herpetologist and member of the Andover Conservation Commission.
Photo by Jeff Mills.

conference, continued from page 6

help municipalities with information including the development of Conservation and Development Plans and Natural Resource Inventories. Collectively, these local actions can result in major statewide benefits for the conservation of Connecticut's native fish, wildlife, and their habitats. This two-session workshop provided a forum for information sharing and dialogue to advance thinking and action related to implementation of Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan. Specific outcomes included a list of actions that CACIWC members can focus on, ways for CACIWC members to benefit from the Plan, ideas for building momentum, and implementation stories to learn from. Part 1 includes basic information about the Wildlife Action Plan and introduces implementation tools developed for the 2025 revision.

The third track A workshop, ***"Implementation of Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan: CACIWC's Essential Role, Part 2,"*** was again presented by Brian Hess, Wildlife Biologist - Wildlife Diversity Program, CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), Kevin Burgio, Wildlife Biologist - Terwilliger Consulting, Inc., Katy Bischoff, PhD

student, UConn, & Hank Gruner, Herpetologist & Andover Conservation Commission member.

They outlined the Connecticut's 2025 Wildlife Action Plan identifies priority actions to address issues facing Connecticut's native fish, wildlife and habitats for the next 10 years. Involvement from partners throughout the state is crucial to ensure that key actions in the 2025 Plan are implemented. Connecticut's municipalities, particularly their Conservation and Inland Wetland Commissions, are uniquely positioned to facilitate conservation actions at local levels. Additionally, the Plan can help municipalities with information including the development of Conservation and Development Plans and Natural Resource Inventories. Collectively, these local actions can result in major statewide benefits for the conservation of Connecticut's native fish, wildlife, and their habitats. This second part of the two-session workshop provided a forum for information sharing and dialogue to advance thinking and action related to implementation of Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan. Specific outcomes include a very useful list of actions that CACIWC members can focus on, ways for CACIWC members to benefit from the Plan, ideas for building momentum, and imple-

convention, continued on page 8

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conference, continued from page 7

mentation stories to learn from. Part 2 included information about how conservation commission priorities mesh with the Wildlife Action Plan and a discussion of challenges and opportunities for implementation.

Three workshops of interest to Connecticut commissions were also scheduled in Track B, *Inland Wetlands Law and Regulation*.

The first workshop entitled ***“Inland Wetlands Law; CT DEEP Online Training Course Questions & Answers,”*** was presented by Janet Brooks, Attorney at Law, LLC with Retired Judge Marshall Berger, Jr. This workshop reviewed the many important components of the DEEP inland wetlands online training program is now required for all. The workshop leaders asked the audience if watching the DEEP training modules resulted in questions that you wished you could have asked a live presenter? Attendees were asked if they had watched a module or two and were blown away by covering all of the wetlands act in module 2. Many attendees brought questions that resulted from completing the online training. They were also asked to bring their municipal regulations in whatever format you will be accessing them at during every commission meeting – tablet, laptop or hard-copy. Attorney Brooks also referenced the DEP Model Regulations, 4th edition (2006) and the CT inland wetlands statute during this hands-on workshop. She and Judge Berger also welcomed attendees who did not complete the training.

Our second track B workshop, ***“2025 Wetlands Law & Regulations Update with Question & Answer Session,”*** presented by Mark Branse, Halloran & Sage, LLP, Retired Judge Marshall Berger, Jr., and Janet Brooks, Attorney at Law, LLC. This legal team again reviewed current case law and other issues with inland wetlands law and proposed legalization and regulations. The team also invited questions from the attendees and participated in an informative and lengthy question and answer session which received an active discussion from the panelists and those in attendance.

The third B workshop, entitled ***“Updates on Approaches to Protection of Riparian Areas”*** was presented by Alicea Charamut, Executive Director, Rivers Alliance of Connecticut, with Mark Branse, Halloran & Sage,

LLP, Janet Brooks, Attorney at Law, LLC, Retired Judge Marshall Berger, Jr. serving as legal resources.

Alicea emphasized the importance of protecting riparian areas has grown to national prominence during recent severe flooding events throughout the country. In addition to helping to mitigate storms, these areas are valuable in the protection of aquatic habitats, water quality and essential for source water protection. The scope of work of the CT General Assembly “Working Group on Riparian Buffers” currently underway was discussed along with a comparison of the approaches to regulating buffers and upland review areas while emphasizing the role of local land use agencies in protection of these critical areas. The experts on inland wetlands and planning & zoning law also provided updates and responded detailed to legal questions.

Three workshops of interest to conservation commissions were scheduled in Track C. *Riparian Ecology & Climate Impacts*.

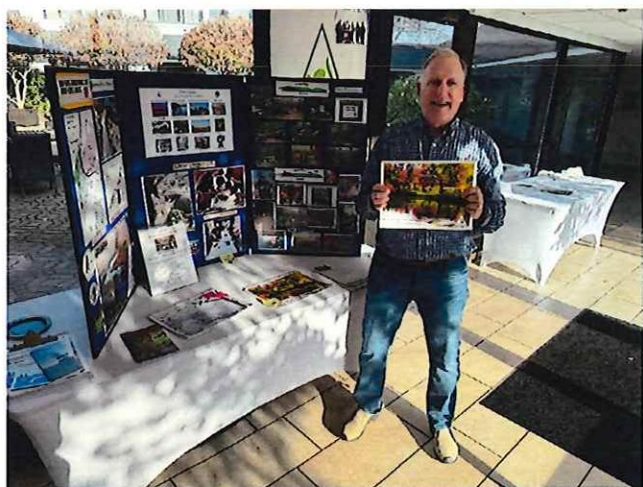
The first track C workshop, ***“Natural and manmade factors limiting stream dynamics: How policies on beaver management and culverts impact climate resilience,”*** was presented by Louanne Cooley and Kayla Vargas from the Connecticut Institute of Resilience and Climate Adaptation (UConn CIRCA). They reviewed how current climate change modeling points to increased precipitation as temperatures rise, emphasizing that knowing where and when that precipitation will fall will remain unresolved. The speakers pointed out how municipal staff can increase their ability to reduce vulnerability to flooding by understanding how waterways may be vulnerable to flooding under higher or extreme precipitation. They also pointed out how nature-based solutions like riparian corridors or enhanced beaver habitat can slow down water flow allowing for more infiltration. They also emphasized how knowing where manmade constrictions like culverts are located and if these structures are adequate is a first step in increasing infrastructure resilience to future climate impacts.

The second track C workshop, ***“Riparian tree canopy density as a key indicator of water quality: Fostering informed wetland management in Connecticut’s towns and watersheds,”*** was presented by Tracey L. Miller, PhD, Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture,

conference, continued on page 9

conference, continued from page 8

Food, and Environment, University of Kentucky. She outlined the positive relationship that exists between riparian trees and the condition and function of wetlands and watercourses. Consequently, high degrees of riparian disturbance can create widespread stressors on wetlands and watercourses. Research in silviculture has identified an optimal balance of dappled shade and open sunlight to support stream integrity in isolated, naturalized areas. However, less is known about the relationship between riparian tree canopy density (RTCD) and water quality along urban-rural gradients. This data gap constrains wetland managers from making informed decisions on tree removal for wetland permit applications. This project identifies relationships between RTCD and watercourse integrity in Connecticut over a ten-year period. The project uses existing forest cover and water quality data to identify RTCD within 300-meter watercourse buffers adjacent to unimpaired wetlands and watercourses contrasted with impaired wetlands and watercourses. The project identified 40 municipalities of special concern and recommends adding riparian tree ordinances to their planning and zoning regulations. Identifying RTCD as



Bolton Conservation Commission Exhibit Table with Rod Parlee, Bolton CC Chair & CACIWC Board Member.
Photo by Jeff Mills.

a key indicator of water quality has important implications for Connecticut's public policy, riparian management, and planning efforts.

A third track C workshop, ***"CT DEEP Volunteer Water Monitoring Program & Cold-Water Stream Habitat Mapping,"*** was presented by Melissa Czarnowski, Volunteer Monitoring Coordinator and Mary

Becker, Water Monitoring & Assessment Supervisor Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP).

They pointed out how Connecticut is fortunate to be a water-rich state, home to thousands of miles of rivers and streams and thousands of acres of lakes and ponds. One of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) Water Monitoring and Assessment Program's primary tasks is to conduct water quality monitoring assessments to evaluate the conditions of all waters in the State. Given limited staff resources, this wealth of water resources presents a challenge to achieve this goal by DEEP staff alone. One way DEEP has enhanced assessments is by utilizing volunteer data to work towards this goal. This presentation provided an overview of DEEP's volunteer water monitoring programs and how your community can get involved! Attendees also learned about how DEEP uses fish and temperature data, including data collected by volunteers, to map cold-water habitat that is critical for some of our most sensitive native species to survive.

Three workshops of interest to conservation commissions were scheduled in Track D. *Assisting Commissioners with New Tools & Updated Programs.*

The first track D workshop, entitled ***"New CT DEEP Online GIS Tool for Evaluating Renewable Energy Siting (CREST),"*** was presented by Stuart DeLand, CT DEEP, Environmental Analyst, Engineering, Safety, and Sustainability Division & Eric Hammerling, CT DEEP, Director, Office of Environmental Review & Strategic Initiatives (ERSI).

The workshop presenters outlined how, in May, the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) launched a web-based tool to assist communities with the potential siting of solar projects and further the goal of increasing Connecticut's supply of zero-carbon energy. The "Community Renewable Energy Siting Tool" (CREST) provides free access to ~35 layers of data – demographic, forestry, geology, land use, water, wildlife, and more – from state, federal, and institutional sources that can be used by municipal commissions, community planners, solar developers, conservation organizations, members of the public, and others to visualize where renewable energy best fits into Connecticut's diverse landscape. Attend-

conference, continued on page 10

conference, continued from page 9

ees were pleased to learn that tool is both free to use and does not require a Geographic Information Systems license or specialized training, is maintained for quality control by DEEP, and is available today for a variety of potential uses. Many in attendance seemed interested in using CREST and asked additional follow-up questions from the developers of the tool at DEEP.

The second track D workshop, entitled ***“Free & Field-Tested: How CT RC&D’s Environmental Review Team Can Help Your Municipality,”*** was presented by Christian Swanson, Energy & Environmental Programs Coordinator, Jocelyn Lahey, Executive Director, Connecticut Resource Conservation & Development Area, Inc. (CT RC&D), and Jim Cordier, Hebron Wetlands Agent/Land Use Assistant. The workshop directors outlined the **Environmental Review Team (ERT)** program, which provides municipalities and land trusts with a team of expert volunteers who complete natural resource inventories, offer best management practices, and support conservation-based decision making. Those in attendance learned about the history of the ERT program, the application process, how CT RC&D coordinates site visits & the review process, and viewed some completed ERT reports. Jim Cordier, Hebron Wetlands Agent/Land Use Assistant also shared his experience and told how they have utilized their ERT report in land-use decision making and conservation efforts.



Stuart DeLand, CT DEEP. Photo by Jeff Mills.

The third and final track D workshop, entitled ***“The Why and the How of Land Conservation for Municipalities,”*** was presented by Kathy Czepiel, Connecticut Land Protection Manager. Save the Sound and Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director, Connecticut Land Conservation Council (CLCC).

They described how new conservation commissioners should go about conserving land in your community. The workshop outlined the importance of these land conservation efforts. Many conservation commissioners who were new to land conservation, appreciated how the presentation walked them through the role of conservation commissions.



Christian Swanson, Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Area (CT RC&D). Photo by Jeff Mills.

The workshop presenters also reviewed how to establish your conservation values, identify and prioritize
conference, continued on page 11

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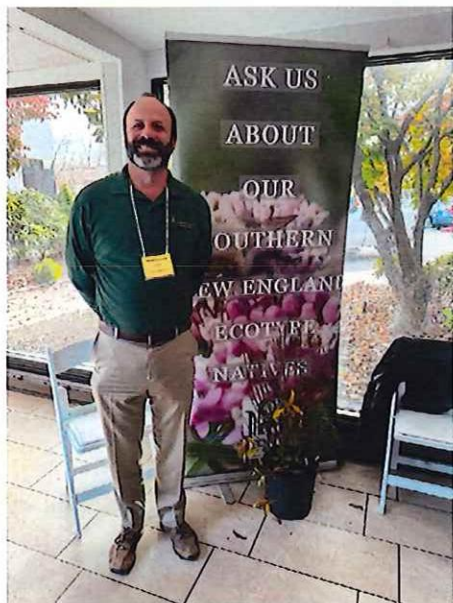
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Amy Blaymore Paterson & Rebecca Dorsey, CLCC. Photo by Jeff Mills.

land acquisitions, collaborate with the community, fund the purchase of land or a conservation easement, access helpful resources, and help your town become a better steward of the land you hold.



Darryl Newman, Planters' Choice Nursery. Photo by Jeff Mills.

For additional details of these workshops, please note that many of the PowerPoint presentations prepared by our speakers and workshop leaders are available on our website 2024 annual conference page, at: [CACIWC Annual Meeting 2025](https://www.caciwc.org).

During our 2025 conference, CACI-

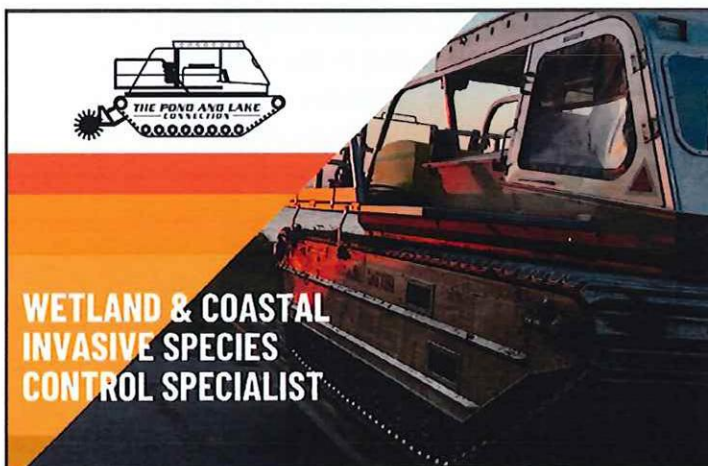
WC hosted many nonprofit and commercial **exhibitors** that provide their informative displays in an easy to view arrangement between the entrance and main ballroom adjacent to the food and beverage service. Our conference survey revealed an appreciation for the information provided by these exhibits, along with the networking opportunities that occurred in these areas.

We again thank the conference attendees and all those responsible for organizing our **48th Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference**. To allow our members the opportunity to submit ideas for workshop topics and other suggestions, the CACIWC

Annual Meeting Committee has decided to again maintain the AnnualMtg@caciwc.org email throughout the year. We used many of your suggestions in our 2025 conferences so please keep forwarding your suggestions to us. We look forward to your participation at our upcoming 2026 Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference!



Jeff Stahl & Peter Grundy, The Pond & Lake Connection. Photo by Jeff Mills.



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riparian, continued from page 1

Representatives of many environmental and conservation groups who had provided supportive testimony for SHB 7174 (SA25-12) were invited to serve the working group including Alicea Charamut of Rivers Alliance of Connecticut, Bill Lucey of Save the Sound, Bill Hyatt representing cold water anglers, John Guskowski, American Planning Association, Francis Pickering of WestCOG, Denise Savageau of Connecticut Association of Conservation Districts, Aimee Petras of the Farmington River Watershed Association, Mary Pelletier of Park River Watershed, and Alan Siniscalchi, for CACIWC. Organizations who represented parties who may be impacted by increased regulation to protect riparian areas were also appointed to the working group including the Connecticut Association of Realtors, CT Farm Bureau, Connecticut Marine Trades Association, Home Builders & Remodelers Association of Connecticut, CT Nursery & Landscape Association, Lower Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments, South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority, and others.

Two legislators and members of the Environment Committee representing each major political party were also appointed to the working group: Representative Doug Dubitsky (47th House District, R) and Representative Mike Demicco (21st House District, D).

Representatives of several state agencies were invited to serve as non-voting members including the CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), the Department of Transportation (DOT), and the Office of Policy and Management (OPM). Several experts were invited to provide comments and serve as legal, scientific and technical experts including Attorney Janet Brooks and representatives of UConn CLEAR.

As Mary reviewed and as stated in the working group report (see *), Substitute House Bill No. 7174 established a working group within the legislative branch to determine whether and how to enhance the protection of vegetated riparian buffers in Connecticut. The group was tasked with identifying how to incorporate these protections into existing statutes and regulations to improve the health of the state's watercourses while respecting private property rights. The working group would then review practices from other states, assess

current resources from the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), analyze existing case law, as well as make recommendations for legislative changes regarding oversight of inland wetlands and watercourses.

Attorney Janet Brooks gave a brief legal history and cited the *Riverbend* case as the primary obstacle that must be overcome to incorporate riparian buffer protections into CT statutes. She pointed out that, under the current statutes, a regulated activity triggers a permit, whether there is an adverse impact or not. The *Riverbend* case requires when an agency denies a wetlands permit that the burden of proof is on the municipal inland wetlands agency to prove an adverse impact. This restricts the ability of local agencies to consider regulating vegetation removal. Attorney Brooks also discussed which municipal agencies would be most appropriate to assess impacts on riparian buffers. She emphasized that local wetland agencies are accustomed to receiving reports and should be chosen for regulating riparian buffers. Reaching out to two attorneys, one who represents developers and another who represents both developers and municipalities, Brooks summarized their views that wetland laws are interpreted more flexibly in favor of environmental protection, while zoning laws are more rigid and can lead to litigation. She recommended we avoid creating overlapping jurisdiction between municipal inland wetlands and watercourse agencies (IWWA) and planning & zoning commissions, which would slow the review of development applications, and place oversight of riparian buffers within Inland Wetlands & Watercourses Act. Brooks further recommended listing known ecological benefits of native vegetation in statute and authorizing commissions to require native vegetation within x feet (specify). This would preclude an adverse finding every time.

Other information and suggestions were presented and discussed by members of the working group. Many were approved as consensus items including:

Revise CT General Statutes (CGS) Section 22a-41a to allow IWWA to consider impacts of any proposed regulated activity on watercourses that would decrease resilience to erosion from severe storms and extreme weather events, or result in increases in water temperatures (suggested by CACIWC).

riparian, continued on page 13

riparian, continued from page 12

Revise CGS Section 22a-38 Definitions: change the definition of “material” to include vegetation, as 22a-38 (6) “Material” means any substance, solid or liquid, organic or inorganic, including, but not limited to vegetation, soil, sediment, aggregate, land, gravel, clay, bog, mud, debris, sand, refuse or waste (suggested by Attorney Brooks who also emphasized the need to educate local IWWA commissioners on all changes).

So, what happened to the recommendations of this working group? During the opening weeks of the 2026 Session of the Connecticut General Assembly (CGA), Representative Mushinski and other members of the CGA Environment Committee introduced a bill to develop protection for these areas.

This introduced bill (Raised Bill HB 5334 *AN ACT CONCERNING RIPARIAN AREAS*) was developed to create greater protection and preservation of areas immediately adjacent to watercourses in the state in order to preserve and improve the quality of such watercourses, see: [AN ACT CONCERNING RIPARIAN AREAS](#).

While many of the conservation and environmental groups who supported SHB 7174 (SA25-12) that created the *Riparian Area Working Group* also testified generally in favor of this bill, they pointed out many working group consensus items were omitted and new language which was not even discussed by the working group was introduced into this bill.

Based on the many comments and written testimony, the Environment Committee made some additional changes and passed a Joint Favorable Substitute (JFS) version out of committee.

This version was also sent to the Appropriations Committee who added funding for a inland wetlands training position at CT DEEP. Unfortunately, some of the problematic language pointed out by members of the Connecticut environmental community was not corrected.

Surprisingly, as the bill moved closer to a vote by the full house and senate, new problematic language was being discussed and introduced. One proposed

amendment, House LCO Amendment #5343, had several changes that were far removed from the recommendations of the working group including language that could prevent CACIWC member commissions from voting against an application that removed important riparian vegetation, see: [“AN ACT CONCERNING RIPARIAN AREAS.”](#)

Fortunately, after urgent concerns about this problematic language were raised by CACIWC and a few buffer protection advocates this proposed amendment was not called leaving a final version of the bill House Schedule A #5993 in which removed all language except for the section requiring additional DEEP position for wetlands training, see: [“AN ACT CONCERNING RIPARIAN AREAS.”](#)

This greatly shortened bill was unanimously passed by both the House & Senate and was signed into law by Governor Ned Lamont on May 20.

Obviously, many people were disappointed by the outcome of this bill, which abandoned the many long detailed discussions and consensus items of the *Working Group on Riparian Areas*, not the least being Representative Mary Mushinsky, who announced that she was not seeking reelection to her 24th term representing her 85th District for 46 years. She is one of the longest serving CT state representative, having joined the House in 1980. (CACIWC will be providing additional information on Mary’s long legislative career in upcoming issues of *The Habitat*).

So, what comes next for efforts to protect Connecticut’s riparian areas? Connecticut conservation and environmental groups and others will be closely watching during the next legislative session does not begin until Wednesday, January 6, 2027.

During the next few months, CACIWC will be research options for our members and plans mid-year training, new articles in *The Habitat* as well as new workshops in our 2026 Annual Meeting and Environmental Conference. Stay tuned for more information and updates!

*also see: [Report of the Riparian Buffers Working Group \(002\).pdf](#) 🍁

New CT DEEP Online Statewide Inland Wetlands Activity Reporting Form (SIWWARF)

In an effort to improve administrative processes and make things easier for the state's inland wetland agents, DEEP has developed a new online activity reporting form. The Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act was amended in 1987 with the addition of CGS Section 22a-39(m) which required the DEEP to adopt regulations establishing reporting requirements for permits, orders, and other actions taken by municipal inland wetlands agencies, as well as develop a form for said reports.

The resulting Statewide Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Activity Reporting Form (SIWWARF), was a paper form to be mailed in to the DEEP monthly by each of the 171 municipal inland wetlands agencies for each agency action taken. Now, as part of a project funded by an EPA Wetlands Program Development Grant, the DEEP's Inland Wetland Management Program (IWMP) has been working to migrate the paper form to an online-submittable, GIS-connected form

which will eliminate the need for municipalities to mail in paper forms, and ensures the information collected will be immediately accessible for data analysis. Please see the Frequently Asked Questions below for more information!

Why is the form changing?

- The existing paper forms are entered by hand into an online database that is no longer supported by State Information Technology departments, which also doesn't optimize analysis of the current status and trends of inland wetlands, including losses and gains. Moving to a GIS-connected database in conjunction with the online form, similar to DEEP's wildly successful bear sighting online form and database, allows for instantaneous, up-to-date record-keeping, improves analysis of inland wetlands data, and eliminates the need for municipalities to mail in forms.

new form, continued on page 15

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new form, continued from page 14

Who can fill out the form?

- Authorized personnel, such as a member of the Inland Wetlands Agency, a duly appointed wetlands agent, or other municipal staff member who can reasonably verify that the information entered is correct.

Previously, the paper form was included in our application packet and filled out by the applicant. Can applicants fill out the online form?

- While the paper form identified a section that may be filled out by the applicant, it also required that a municipal personnel member complete a section of the form and then mail it in. Likewise, municipalities are free to provide a similar paper version of the online form as part of their application packet to more easily collect the necessary information, but we ask that the online SIWWARF be filled out and submitted by the municipality, not the applicant, to ensure conformance with regulations that require that the inland wetland and watercourses agency report actions to the Commissioner.

Our town has a backlog of paper forms that haven't been mailed in yet. How should those forms be submitted?

- We encourage all municipalities to use the online form as soon as possible and to submit any remaining paper forms that haven't already been mailed in. The IWMP has developed a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for transcribing paper forms onto the online SIWWARF for submission. Please note that the forms are **not** identical. The online form may ask for information not included on the existing paper form and vice versa. Use your best judgement based on the information available to complete the online form to the best of your ability.

But wait, I have more questions!

- DEEP's IWMP will be holding monthly office hours, starting February 10, 2026 at 2:00 pm to answer questions that may come up as you use the form. A link to register for these office hours will be sent to all municipalities, along with the link to the online form and the SOP developed for transcribing unsubmitted paper

forms. If you are concerned that your town has not received that information, please reach out to Kristen O'Neill, IWMP program administrator, at Kristen.oneill@ct.gov.

Please view the new online form at: [Statewide Inland Wetlands & Watercourses Activity Reporting](#). You can also find additional useful links to resources and other information on the CT DEEP Inland Wetlands and Watercourses home page:

Municipal Contact Information

A [directory](#) of municipal inland wetlands agency staff (inland wetlands agents) is provided as a service to the public and is updated periodically. Please consult your town or city website, or contact the town or city clerk, for current information. Inland wetlands agencies and staff - please ensure your contact information is current. Provide updates using the [Notification of Change Form](#).

Inland Wetlands and Watercourses: A Cooperative Ecosystem

The Inland Wetlands Management Program has created this [new outreach material](#) intended for towns to be able to use to clarify the different roles and responsibilities that play into wetlands management in Connecticut. 🍁



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Enjoy the Informative Connecticut River Watershed Webinars Scheduled for 2026!

The Connecticut River Watershed Seminar Series: History, Challenges, Promise, and Revival are presented in collaboration with Estuary Magazine, The Watershed Fund, the Old Lyme Conservation Commission, and The Connecticut River Salmon Association.

The webinars are scheduled on Wednesdays, 6–7 p.m., via Zoom Program. All webinars are presented by experts in their fields who will provide in-depth, accessible, and timely explorations of the river's history, terrestrial habitats, aquatic habitats, invasive plants, geology, along with restoration efforts. The series is planned to span eight sessions over two years.

The first webinar, which took place on January 7, 2026 was Water Quality, presented by Dr. Andrew Fisk, Northeast Regional Director, American Rivers.

The second webinar on April 8, 2026 was Avian Habitats, presented by Jillian Liner, Director of Conservation, Audubon Vermont.

A third CT River Watershed webinar Zoom presentation was scheduled on Wednesday, July 8, 2026, entitled Building Resilient Habitats within the watershed was presented by Dan Wilder, Director of Applied Ecology, Norcross Wildlife Foundation.

The fourth and final event in the seminar/webinar series will be on October 14, 2026 - Aquatic Habitats, by Stephen Gephard, who recently retired from the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) after 42 years as a fisheries biologist.

Attendance is free but registration is required, see: <https://www.estuarymagazine.com/webinar3/>.

If you missed any of the earlier CT River Watershed Webinars you view the recordings of each webinar, which can be found at: [Estuary Magazine - YouTube](#). 🍂