
OLR Bill Analysis

sHB 5523 (as amended by House "A")*

AN ACT CONCERNING A TRIBAL WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES ADVISORY COUNCIL.

SUMMARY

This bill creates the Connecticut Tribal Wildlife and Fisheries Advisory Council within the legislative branch to (1) make recommendations to the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) on how state fish and wildlife conservation plans and policies can integrate tribal ecological knowledge and stewardship practices and (2) promote sustainable natural resource use consistent with state conservation goals. (The advisory council's work does not apply to lands held in federal trust for a tribe or to reservation lands that remain under tribal jurisdiction.)

The bill also requires the DEEP commissioner to (1) give free hunting and fishing licenses or permits to any Connecticut resident who is an enrolled member of a federally- or state-recognized tribe for lawful activities conducted outside reservation lands in the state. The bill requires the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan Fund to be used to cover any fees typically associated with these licenses or permits. The bill specifies that these activities are subject to state conservation laws and regulations, including those applicable to state parks and forests, seasons, and species protections. It also requires tribal members using these permits to comply with applicable (1) state safety and education requirements and (2) federal requirements on taking migratory birds or other federally regulated species, including any required registration, reporting, or federal permits or stamps.

Additionally, the bill reduces, from 250 to 10 acres, the required minimum size of a reservation in order for a tribal member to qualify for a free private land deer permit from DEEP to take deer on the tribe's reservation land. As under existing law, a member can only be issued

one private land deer permit per season, and the permit must allow for the use of rifle, shotgun, muzzleloader, or bow and arrow on the reservation from November 1 until December 31.

Lastly, the bill requires the Department of Agriculture (DoAg) commissioner to prioritize tribal meat, fish, and aquaculture processing facilities for technical assistance, U.S. Department of Agriculture certification support, and eligibility for state or federal infrastructure funding programs. This prioritization must support tribal food sovereignty, local food systems, and community-based economic development.

*House Amendment "A" (1) adds members to the Tribal Wildlife and Fisheries Advisory Council and removes a requirement for the council's tribal members to hold meetings and invite nontribal members at their discretion, (2) sets a process for DEEP to (a) verify that tribal members qualify for free hunting and fishing licenses and permits and (b) satisfy fees associated with these licenses and permits, (3) allows tribes to get reimbursed for hunting and fishing licenses and permits beyond those the bill requires DEEP to give for free, and (4) adds the provision lowering the acreage required for a private land deer permit.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 1, 2026

CONNECTICUT TRIBAL WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES ADVISORY COUNCIL

Under the bill, the advisory council includes the following 29 members:

1. two members from each of the five federally- or state-recognized tribes identified in Connecticut statute;
2. the DEEP commissioner or her designee;
3. one member each from DEEP's wildlife and fisheries divisions, appointed by the DEEP commissioner;
4. one member from DoAg, appointed by the DoAg commissioner;

5. one member from DoAg's Bureau of Aquaculture, appointed by the DoAg commissioner;
6. one member from the Connecticut Agriculture Experiment Station, appointed by the station's director;
7. one member from Connecticut Sea Grant, appointed by the organization;
8. one member from the University of Connecticut Native American and Indigenous Studies Department, appointed by the department's head;
9. one representative of a land conservation organization, appointed by the Senate president pro tempore;
10. one representative of a watershed advocacy organization, appointed by the House speaker;
11. one representative of the Connecticut Fisheries Advisory Council;
12. one representative of an avian conservation organization, appointed by the Senate minority leader;
13. one representative of a sportsmen or hunting organization, appointed by the House minority leader;
14. one representative of the Native American Heritage Advisory Council, appointed by the governor;
15. the Long Island Soundkeeper or his designee; and
16. the Environment Committee's chairpersons and ranking members or their designees.

The bill requires the advisory council's tribal members to develop and distribute to all other members written processes and procedures for conducting council business and holding meetings.

FISHING AND HUNTING LICENSES AND PERMITS FOR TRIBAL MEMBERS

The bill requires the DEEP commissioner to give Connecticut residents who are enrolled tribal members free (1) recreational fishing licenses, (2) hunting licenses, (3) trapping licenses, and (4) archery permits for lawful activities conducted outside reservation lands in Connecticut. A tribal member applying for a free permit can verify their eligibility by either:

1. presenting a valid ID card issued by a federally- or state-recognized tribe demonstrating their enrollment in the tribe or
2. using any additional reasonable, lawful method and procedure the commissioner establishes in consultation with the tribes, including procedures for municipal verification.

After receiving a license or permit application, the commissioner must verify the applicant's eligibility within a reasonable time period.

Satisfying License and Permit Fees

The bill requires (1) the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) secretary, on an ongoing and annual basis, to allocate funds from the state's Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan Fund to DEEP and (2) DEEP to use these funds to satisfy the fees associated with the above-mentioned licenses and permits issued to tribal members for free.

The DEEP commissioner must ensure that all licenses and permits issued under the bill's provisions are recorded as part of the standard licensing system, including the license or permit's value and the funding source used to satisfy the fee, to maintain auditable records and comply with federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration requirements. These records must be kept in a manner consistent with state law and included in any reports required for federal reimbursement or program compliance.

Requesting Reimbursement for Additional Licenses and Permits

The bill generally requires federally- or state-recognized tribes to give OPM a report listing and identifying the cost of any additional state-

issued permits, licenses, endorsements, or stamps that tribal members must purchase for fishing and hunting activities. Under the bill, the OPM secretary must, on an ongoing and annual basis, allocate funds from the Mashantucket Pequot and Mohegan Fund to any tribe that submits a report to refund the fees associated with the additional identified permits, licenses, endorsements, or stamps.

COMMITTEE ACTION

Environment Committee

Joint Favorable Substitute

Yea 24 Nay 10 (03/18/2026)