

Environment Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No: HB-5523 / [Bill Status](#) / [Public Hearing Testimony](#)

AN ACT CONCERNING TRIBAL COMANAGEMENT OF WILDLIFE AND
Title: FISHERIES.

Vote Date: 3/18/2026

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/13/2026

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Environment Committee

Co-Sponsors:

Rep. Aundre Bumgardner, 41st Dist.

Rep. Geraldo C. Reyes, 75th Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

To create a Connecticut tribal wildlife and fisheries commission, authorize free hunting and fishing licenses for tribal members, and establish a framework for a commission and procedures for implementing co-management agreements between the state and the tribes for fish and wildlife resources.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE (IF APPLICABLE):

Substitute language establishes a Connecticut Tribal Wildlife and Fisheries Advisory Council to integrate tribal ecological knowledge into state conservation policies and promote sustainable resource use. It also provides tribal members with free hunting and fishing permits off reservations, access to safety and conservation programs, and prioritizes support for tribal food processing and aquaculture facilities to enhance food sovereignty and economic development.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Katie S. Dykes, Commissioner, CT Department of Energy & Environmental Protection

Commissioner Dykes, mentions concerns with the bill as currently drafted. She states that in section 1 of the of the bill, while DEEP is willing to participate in a voluntary council, they believe that such a body must remain advisory in nature. The Department does not support

the establishment of commissions that could cede regulatory authority over fisheries and wildlife resources to an entity other than the state. In section 2, DEEP opposes a proposal to provide free hunting and fishing permits to Tribal members because it would significantly reduce revenue that funds conservation programs and also decrease related federal funding. While the department supports collaborating with Tribal partners—especially by expanding access to free education and safety programs—it does not support co-management of wildlife and fisheries. Finally, in section 4 of the bill, DEEP reiterates that they do not support co-management agreements but would welcome support from the Tribes concerning their membership rosters so their Tribal members could be effectively identified to avoid state enforcement pitfalls. In conclusion, the department maintains that it should retain full legal authority over natural resource management to ensure consistent, science-based decisions, while still encouraging Tribal input and culturally informed stewardship.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Rahiem Eleazer, Tribal Councilor, Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation

The Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation emphasizes that caring for land and water is a core part of their culture, history, and identity. They support H.B. 5523 because it strengthens collaboration between tribes and the state of Connecticut, particularly through the creation of a Tribal Wildlife and Fisheries Commission that would combine tribal ecological knowledge with state conservation efforts. They also support section 2 of the bill which proposes free hunting and fishing permits for tribal members off reservation lands, recognizing their unique cultural, subsistence, and governmental relationship with natural resources—distinct from recreational use. While maintaining state conservation rules, this provision acknowledges tribal sovereignty and traditions. The tribal councilor argues that the cost of these permits would be minimal, especially compared to the more than \$10 billion tribes have contributed to the state through gaming agreements. The bill also supports tribal food systems and infrastructure, promoting food sovereignty and local resilience. Overall, the Tribal Nation views the bill as a meaningful step in strengthening tribal-state partnerships, supporting conservation, and respecting tribal knowledge and traditions, and urges its approval.

James Gessner Jr, Chairman, Mohegan Tribe

James Gessner Jr., Chairman of the Mohegan Tribe, expresses support for House Bill 5523, which would strengthen tribal sovereignty in Connecticut. The bill would create a Tribal Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, giving tribes a direct role in managing hunting and fishing regulations and incorporating traditional knowledge into conservation. He also supports exempting recognized Tribal members from state hunting and fishing fees, emphasizing that these practices are culturally and historically significant. While acknowledging concerns about lost state revenue, he notes the financial impact would be minimal and suggests offsetting it with funds from casino revenue. Overall, the Mohegan Tribal Council backs the bill as a way to protect tribal rights, culture, and sustainable resource management, and urges its passage.

Senator Cathy Osten, State of Connecticut, 19th District

Senator Osten, states her strong support for the bill, noting that the framework this legislation puts forward would increase state and tribal cooperation and foster closer coordination on the conservation and preservation of our state's wildlife and fisheries resources. In regard to section 2, she feels there must be a clear process for DEEP to determine who is and is not a member of the tribes for the issuance of permits this legislation envisions.

Nathan Frohling, Director of external Affairs, The Nature Conservancy CT

Mr. Frohling, shares his support for the bill and the recognition of how vital Indigenous knowledge is to the management of wildlife and fisheries. He argues that Indigenous people's have long managed land and water using knowledge that complements modern conservation science. The Nature Conservancy's partnership with the Mohegan and Mashantucket Pequot Tribes at Poquetanuck Cove shows the benefits of shared stewardship. He reiterated his support for these collaborative efforts and promotes more inclusive and effective conservation.

Maggie Favretti, Co-Leadership Board Chair, Alliance for the Mystic

Favretti, expresses the need for a stronger Tribal-State relationship and the guarantee that local Indigenous knowledge about environmental practices is heard and acted upon. They emphasize the need for a well-funded commission whose recommendations are taken seriously, and for Tribal citizens to have free access to wildlife they have long stewarded. As well as, arguing that ignoring Tribal ecological knowledge has harmed the environment, and that combining Indigenous and modern knowledge is essential for a sustainable future.

Meg Hourigan, Co-founder, CT Food Sovereignty Collective

Hourigan, highlights that Indigenous tribes in Connecticut have a long history of sustainable land and food system stewardship. They state that the bill would create co-management agreements between tribes and the state, combining Indigenous knowledge with modern conservation. It also supports providing free hunting and fishing licenses to Tribal members to honor their rights and help address food insecurity, while strengthening Indigenous food systems through support for processing facilities. Overall, they note the bill is framed as a step toward food sovereignty, environmental sustainability, and addressing historical injustices, benefiting all residents.

Robert LaFrance, Policy Director, CT National Audubon Society

LaFrance supports House Bill 5523 for creating a Connecticut Tribal Wildlife and Fisheries Commission to improve understanding of Tribal conservation practices through collaboration among tribes, state agencies, and academic institutions. They also recommend including conservation advocacy groups in the Commission and expresses interest in participating. LaFrance testimony highlights the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives, citing the Bald Eagle's designation as a conservation priority due to Tribal input. Overall, they emphasize continued collaboration with Indigenous communities to strengthen conservation efforts and promote a more inclusive, equitable approach to environmental stewardship.

Amy Blaymore Paterson, Executive Director, CT Land Conservation Council

Paterson supports House Bill 5523 as a way to create a cooperative system between Connecticut and Native American tribes for managing wildlife and fisheries. It emphasizes that the bill promotes collaboration, recognizes the longstanding stewardship role of Tribal Nations, and helps incorporate diverse perspectives. They note that the bill aims to strengthen conservation, support tribal food sovereignty, and deepen cultural connections to natural resources.

Rachel Briggs, Staff Attorney, Conservation Law Foundation

The Conservation Law Foundation supports HB 5523 as a step toward restoring decision-making power to Indigenous peoples and incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into environmental stewardship. Attorney Briggs highlights that Connecticut's natural abundance

was historically shaped by Native stewardship and argues that tribal co-management and free hunting licenses are both just and beneficial for conservation. They also recommend adding funding for the proposed commission and clarifying that certain programs be free for Tribal members, while strongly urging passage of the bill.

5 Citizens expressed support for this bill.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Richard Velky, Chief, Schaghticoke Tribal Nation

Richard Velky, Chief of the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation, opposes HB 5523 as currently written. While emphasizing his tribe's long history and mistreatment by the state, he raises concerns about the bill granting authority to certain tribes over others and expresses distrust of increased state involvement in tribal matters. He also questions the bill's practical impact, noting issues like pollution in the Housatonic River limiting fishing, unclear benefits of free permits, and existing access to hunter education. Additionally, he argues that some proposed programs are unnecessary or ineffective for his community. Overall, he believes the bill leaves too many unanswered questions and should not move forward without significant revisions.

2 Citizens expressed opposition to this bill.

Reported by: Luna Romani

Date: 03/20/2026