

Report of the Riparian Buffers Working Group  
To the Environment Committee

March 12, 2026

Pursuant to Special Act 25-12, An Act Concerning Riparian Areas



Photo: Deya Ramsden, VDOF

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## Executive Summary

Connecticut, like other states, is losing vegetated riparian areas in "death by 1,000 cuts." A riparian area is the border on the banks of a watercourse. These riverside borders in their natural state in Connecticut are vegetated. They filter incoming water, remove excess nutrients, slow erosion, and provide shade to protect the waterway to make it habitable for fish and wildlife. According to UConn's data, between 1985-2023, our state lost 17,000 football fields, or 35 square miles of vegetated buffer. Eleven percent was developed, and in the 300 ft zone, 25% was lost. Buffer width should depend on land uses and slope. Small corridors could use 25-50 ft.; larger corridors, 50 ft. Wider riparian buffers are recommended to protect drinking water reservoirs and cold water (trout) fishing areas. These areas have been mapped.

The effects of tree removal from a riparian buffer are an increase in nitrogen and phosphorus and an increase in water temperature. According to a New Hampshire study, if the landscape is 10% impervious (paved) cover, water is impaired. If 30% impervious cover, impairment increases. Today there is a 50% tree canopy cover in CT (2025). Overall, 37% of Connecticut's towns have impaired water resources and 63% are not impaired. When impaired waterways drain into Long Island Sound, the Sound is also impaired. The majority of the Riparian Buffers Working Group recommended several changes to current law to recognize riparian areas, preserve native vegetation along watercourses, clarify the farming exemption and return the burden of proof to the applicant to achieve better water protection and alleviate the regulatory burdens on small towns.

## History

There have been several unsuccessful attempts to pass legislation in CT to protect riparian buffers, which are the areas that border a river or stream and are typically forested in their natural state in New England. In the 2025 legislative session, legislative leaders cited agency opposition as the principal obstacle to passage and proposed a more thorough study to address these concerns.

**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 review practices from other states, assess current resources from the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), analyze existing case law, and make recommendations for legislative changes regarding inland wetlands and watercourses.

The working group was co-chaired by members of the General Assembly and included representatives from various sectors, including environmental advocacy, homebuilding, municipal commissions, water utilities, farmers and others. The group was required to convene within sixty days of the bill's effective date and must submit a report of its findings and recommendations by January 15, 2026. The bill does not include any deletions from current law but introduces new provisions to establish the working group and outline its responsibilities. (June 24, 2025 fastdemocracy.com)

SHB 7174 became [Special Act No. 25-12](#). The law would also respond to the projected impacts on watercourses that are listed in the recommendations of the Governor's Council on Climate Change and to meet the goals for the health of Long Island Sound.

Charge:

1. Review riparian buffer protection in other states.
2. Examine DEEP's resources currently dedicated to Inland Wetlands & Watercourses programs.

3. Determine implications of existing case law on protection of riparian buffers.

4. Make recommendations to DEEP for any changes to IW&W regulations, identify if and how the further protection of vegetated riparian buffers should be incorporated into statutes and regulations, and make recommendations for attendant legislation.

**Members**

State of Connecticut

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## **Meetings, Presentations and Discussions**

The working group met Oct. 10, 22, Nov. 5, 21, Dec. 3, 10, 2025 and January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2026, and heard from presenters, including researchers, regulators, advocates and land use and agency attorneys.

### **New England Approaches to Buffer Protection, Oct. 10**

Co-chairs Reps. Mary Mushinsky and Mark Anderson requested an analysis for the October 10<sup>th</sup> meeting by Office of Legislative Research to resolve the controversy regarding the extent of riparian buffer protection in Connecticut compared to the other New England states. David Dickerson, legislative analyst II, presented his findings:

*Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont all have laws designed to protect wetlands and their adjacent areas, known as “buffer zones.” These laws regulate activities in these areas, including by (1) setting buffer zone size; (2) requiring permits for certain activities in the wetlands and buffer zones (e.g., dredging, draining, or building structures); and (3) specifying the activities that are not subject to permitting requirements (e.g., certain cutting of vegetation or other minor activities). The buffer zones across these states vary widely.*

#### *CT's Upland Review Areas*

*Connecticut’s Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act (IWWA) requires municipalities to regulate activities in or affecting wetlands and watercourses in their territorial limits (CGS § 22a-42). (There is a separate law for activities in tidal areas.) Wetlands and watercourses include, among other things, rivers, streams, brooks, lakes, ponds, swamps, and bogs. The types of activity covered are construction, removing material, and filling. Under the IWWA, municipalities may regulate activities in areas that are likely to impact or affect wetlands or watercourses, commonly referred to as “upland review areas,” buffers, or setbacks. The Department of Environmental Protection issued guidelines in 1997 for municipalities implementing these provisions in their wetland regulations. These buffers vary in size across municipalities. (Wetlands Buffer Zones in New England, David Dickerson, Legislative Analyst II September 11, 2025 | 2025-R-0115)*

### **Consensus items, Oct. 10**

- The group agreed that its work will focus on watercourses.
- There was a consensus that a one-size-fits-all approach for buffer widths is not appropriate.
- Any recommendations should allow flexibility to reflect site conditions while maintaining protection goals.
- Recommendations should ensure clear and unambiguous implementation by local land use commissions.
- The intent is to preserve existing native vegetation along watercourses, not to mandate restoration on previously developed sites.
- Regulators can encourage restoration of vegetation through incentives and voluntary programs.

### **For future consideration, Oct. 10**

- Impact on agriculture and working lands—do we end the permanent exemption? For new farmers?
- Impact on marinas? See Maine
- Can recommendations enjoy uniform application?
- Effect on waterfront access—converting landowners from sweeping lawns to paths through vegetation for water access
- Ensuring balance with property rights of landowner and downstream owners and users
- Local regulators requested tools that allow them to protect native vegetation along watercourses to reduce stormwater pollution impacts and improve water quality downstream in a way that balances with property rights.

(Alicia Charmut, Summary for Buffers Briefing, Oct. 10)

### **Examination of DEEP's Resources, Oct. 22**

The October 22<sup>nd</sup> meeting discussed DEEP's diminished staff for water resources to answer questions for municipal regulators. **Brian Thompson** with **Kristin O'Neill**, municipal liaison, reviewed DEEP's responsibilities to permit review for state activities, including infrastructure related permits such as roads (DOT), energy projects, Natural Diversity Data Base and other state-level proposals. The agency is working at maximum capacity and is concerned about new requirements. They fear they would need to answer many inquiries from municipalities as new legislation would generate calls. Science supports the value of riparian buffers, but it is hard to implement.

### **Consensus items, Oct. 22**

- DEEP expressed concerns about the impact on their staff resources if we recommend new requirements for buffer protection.
- Several members offered to assist with training for municipalities if DEEP would authorize their participation.
- Regulators want to protect buffers but need clear tools and no ambiguity.
- DEEP will need additional staff and resources to effectively support local commissions and implement any new buffer protection requirements.

(Alicia Charmut, Summary for Buffers Briefing, Oct. 22)

### **Determine implications of existing case law, implementation, and ecological benefits, Nov. 5**

**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. Current statute is permitting; a regulated activity triggers a permit, whether there is an adverse impact or not. The burden of proof is on the municipal agency to prove an adverse impact. This case holds agencies back when they consider regulating vegetation removal. Brooks stated 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, which would slow development, and place riparian buffers in Inland

Wetlands & Watercourses. 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.

**Denise Savageau** of Old Lyme Zoning, and a former regulator in Greenwich, recommended we look at Inland Wetland and Watercourses Commissions for expertise, as they are regulatory while zoning is absolute. Forest is the natural vegetative element in our state and provides physical, chemical, thermal and hydrological protection of rivers and streams, avoiding nutrient loading and algal blooms. Forest slows down rainfall and allows it to replenish streamflow. Savageau mentioned tools for regulators: one is UConn CLEAR's Source Water Protection assessment tool, used by CT DPH. The watershed assessment tool uses buffer presence and width.

**Bill Lucey, Soundkeeper**, reviewed the 303d Impaired Waters List which displays miles of rivers which are impaired for some human uses. There is a relationship between percent paved surface and impaired waters: 12% paved or higher produces impaired water quality. He discussed the effectiveness of buffer widths: for buffers at least 25 feet, up to 60% of nitrogen is removed. For buffers 26-50 feet, more than 70% of nitrogen is removed. For buffers over 50 feet, 80-90% nitrogen reduction is achieved. Trees and shrubs can remove nitrogen, moderate temperatures, improve water quality, and stabilize streambanks. A no-mow strip can remove fertilizer but doesn't provide thermal protection. Thermal effects are real: CT has lost 75% of stream habitat. Stream fencing to direct livestock to crossings has improved stream health and restored trout in Salisbury.

Language in Public Act 21-29 was mentioned as a possible tool for zoning officials:

*(10) In any municipality that is contiguous to or on a navigable waterway draining to Long Island Sound, (A) be made with reasonable consideration for the restoration and protection of the ecosystem and habitat of Long Island Sound; (B) be designed to reduce hypoxia, pathogens, toxic contaminants and floatable debris on Long Island Sound; and (C) provide that such municipality's zoning commission consider the environmental impact on Long Island Sound coastal resources, as defined in section 22a-93, of any proposal for development.*

Co-chair Mushinsky requested members suggest language and DEEP asked that their legal staff be invited to provide their perspective, which was done. UConn CLEAR would also be invited to present. Martin Heft of OPM suggested looking at regulations for specific locations.

#### **DEEP's Eliza Heins, David Dickson, UConn CLEAR, and Tracey Miller, Nov. 21**

**Eliza Heins, staff attorney for DEEP**, addressed corridors along watercourses, the question of "takings" in land use decision making, and compared buffer protection across New England states. Per the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, applied to the states through the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, private property cannot be taken for public use without just compensation. Cases have determined that: permanent physical occupation is equal to taking; essential nexus is required for permit conditions; permit conditions must be roughly proportional; total deprivation of economically beneficial use is equal to a taking; and actual adverse impact is required to deny a permit. This reinforces the need for nexus and proportionality when regulating activity near protected resources.

Heins also reviewed buffer requirements in other New England states:

Maine: 75 ft from high water mark (streams), 250 ft for rivers. Exemptions: fisheries, vegetative clearing' urban decks, trails, some timber harvesting.

New Hampshire: 50 ft., 150 ft from reference line. Prohibited removal of natural ground cover unless approved. Exemptions: agriculture, timber harvesting, up to 900 sq ft impervious surface.

Vermont: none for watercourses, 50-100 ft for wetlands. As far as possible & reasonable, retain shoreline in natural condition, allow continued access to the waters, retain or provide screening vegetation, stabilize the bank, as necessary, with vegetation.

Massachusetts: 25 ft., other 200 ft. Permit only if the project does not greatly harm the riverfront area and there is no practical and feasible alternative. Exemptions: routine maintenance of lawfully existing lawns, agriculture, construction of docks, boathouses, landings. Pre-existing (before 1996) waived.

Rhode Island: 15 to 65 ft. Exemptions: cutting vegetation on existing or approved lawn; farming; new pedestrian trails.

Connecticut: 100 ft upland review areas. Consider effects on public health and welfare, wildlife, protection from natural disasters. Denial requires adverse impact. Exemptions: uses incidental to residential property, outdoor recreation, farming up to 3 acres.

Summary: most New England states set buffer distances from watercourses (15-250 ft). CT relies on upland review area, generally 100 ft. No state imposes an absolute ban on vegetative removal. Prohibitions by category raise takings concerns.

Heins suggested we add to CT law the adverse impacts to rivers and streams if vegetation is removed (pesticides, temperature, nutrient loading). Add a rebuttable presumption, like Massachusetts. Add that CT's policy is not to remove native vegetation. We know the science; can the standards be improved to match? DEEP could do regulations with funding.

**David Dickson, UConn CLEAR**, stated the problem is the change in the riparian corridor over time. CLEAR used NOAA data for the 100 ft current riparian border and NLCD (National Land Cover Dataset) for changes over time for the 300 ft border. CT lines up behind other states in the data: between 1985-2023, we lost 17,000 football fields, or 35 sq. mi. of buffer. Eleven percent was developed, and in the 300 ft zone, 25% was lost. Buffer width should depend on land uses and slope. Small corridors could use 25-50 ft.; larger corridors, 50 ft. Juliana Barrett is UConn's expert, who could return to brief us. They have a parcel-based tool and metrics for surface water protection. In theory, it could be done. Most towns haven't done their own analysis.

**Tracey Miller, former professor at UConn, now U of Kentucky** said applicants are unsure of what's required, especially tree removal for parking lots. Massachusetts and Rhode Island rules are much clearer. The effects of tree removal are an increase in nitrogen and phosphorus and an increase in water temperature. Per a New Hampshire study, if the landscape is 10% impervious cover, water is impaired. If 30% impervious cover, there is greater impairment. There is a 50% tree canopy cover here (60% cover in Mid-Atlantic states). Overall, 37% of Connecticut towns have impaired water resources and 63% are not impaired. Maintaining the canopy is recommended for water protection.

## Votes on proposed changes to regulations and legislation for 2026 session, Jan. 7

Following are the proposals and votes by the working group. We appreciate the administrators of the working group, Casey Larkin and Piotr Kolakowski, for their assistance.

### Topics for vote

1. 22a-36 New finding, including resilience to flooding, storms, climate change (Berger, Brooks)  
(Note: judge prefers language in finding; LCO opposes)  
**CONSENT**—use New Hampshire language as model
  2. New finding: It is, therefore, the purpose of sections 22a-36 to 22a-45, inclusive, to maintain or improve riparian vegetated areas that provide, or can better provide, protection of watercourses and wetlands by filtering, absorbing, reducing, or otherwise mitigating pollutants such as nutrients and sediment; (Verna, Hollister)  
**CONSENT**—add regulating temperature
  3. New finding (Verna, Hollister)  
FAILED—"not consistent with rest of findings"
  4. New definition: "activity-related vegetated mitigation measure"  
Held for negotiation—Failed
  5. New factor for consideration: may install and maintain a new riparian vegetated area. Agency may consider mitigation measures.  
Held for negotiation--Failed
  6. Definitions (19) "Natural vegetative cover" means naturally occurring and adapted shrubs, **trees and other plants, but does not include lawns or invasive plants included on the list of plants considered to be invasive or potentially invasive annually published and periodically updated pursuant to § 22a-381a.** (RA, Brooks)  
**CONSENT**
  7. 22a-38 definition (20) "water-dependent uses"
    - i. (20) "Water-dependent uses" means those uses and facilities which require direct access to inland watercourses and which therefore cannot reasonably be located inland, including but not limited to: Marinas, recreational and commercial fishing and boating facilities, finfish and shellfish processing plants, waterfront dock and port facilities, shipyards and boat building facilities, water-based recreational uses, navigation aides, basins and channels, industrial uses dependent upon water-borne transportation or requiring large volumes of cooling or process water which cannot reasonably be located or operated at an inland site and uses which provide general public access to inland watercourses. (RA)
- And:
8. 22a-40 (a) boat anchorage or mooring-removal of vegetative cover is allowed if it unreasonably impedes access to water for water-dependent uses. (RA)  
**CONSENT** (both 7 and 8)
  9. 22a-40 a 4 Enjoyment of residential property—add: but shall not include removal of natural vegetative cover within 10 feet of any watercourse (RA)

**PASSED 13-7** (new development would require permit; not "as of right")

10. 22a-42 (a) (d) (3) allow gradations of riparian buffer for known ecological benefits (RA)

DEEP to provide technical guidance for gradations based on known ecological benefits, including for urban rivers.

**CONSENT**

11. Shift burden of proof onto applicant. Applicant shall have burden to establish that proposed activity shall not have adverse impact on inland wetlands and watercourses (Berger, Brooks, Dubitsky)

**CONSENT** (see their language)

12. 22a-41a add factors for consideration: (7) public drinking water delineated by DPH; (8) impacts on cold water habitat delineated by DEEP (RA)

**CONSENT**

15. 22a-41a add factor for consideration: impacts of the proposed regulated activity on watercourses that would decrease resilience to severe storms, extreme weather events, and water temperatures and drought extremes. (CACIWC)

**CONSENT**

16. 12-63g Continue to investigate reducing tax assessment of riparian buffers to inland wetlands, watercourses, and riparian buffers (make eligible for reduced property tax) (RA) (add to informational materials provided to landowners as open space option; restore buffers)

**CONSENT**

17. 22a-38 definitions (6) change definition of "material" to include vegetation. 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; (Brooks) (educate the local commissioners first)

**PASSED 15-4**

18. 22a-41 (6) d add: a municipal inland wetland agency may reasonably ~~presume~~ consider that adverse impacts or affects to such physical characteristics will likely result from the removal of natural vegetation or the increase in impervious cover. (Savageau) "no net new runoff"

**PASSED 12-6**

19. 22a-40 permitted uses as of right: allow road construction and buildings if directly related to farming operation, including the removal of vegetation and trees necessary for road construction and the erection of buildings. For the purposes of this subdivision, the term "filling" shall not be construed to prohibit the placement and installation of materials necessary for road construction, or the erection of buildings, directly related to the farming operation. (Dubitsky)

**PASSED 10-6**

20. 22a-40 permitted uses: (1) conservation of soil, vegetation, including the revegetation of riparian areas with native vegetation and the removal of invasive species (RA, DeFelice, Brooks, Dubitsky)

**CONSENT**

21. Chapter 440-Protection of Wetlands, Watercourses and Riparian Areas (DeFelice)

**CONSENT**

22. 22a-38 definitions (13) ...or riparian area. "Riparian area" means the land bordering a watercourse, delineated by the ordinary high-water mark at the bank. Ordinary high-water mark means the line on the shore indicated by physical characteristics such as a clear, natural line impressed on the bank, shelving, changes in character of soil, destruction of terrestrial vegetation, presence of litter or debris, or other appropriate means. (DeFelice)

**CONSENT** (DEEP has definition in technical guidance)

23. 22a-40 permitted uses: maintenance of any pipe or culvert (deletes date of 7/1/74) (DeFelice)

**CONSENT**

Other: urban river advocates requested restoration of former parking lot areas to vegetation.

Forester requested forestry be added to agriculture. Rep. Dubitsky stated forestry was already included in the definition of agriculture.

### **Final vote on January 12, 2026**

Representatives of the homebuilders and Rivers Alliance attempted a negotiation of items 4 and 5 regarding mitigation and reported back to the working group on January 12, 2026, that they were unable to reach consensus on those items. The negotiators decided against addressing the debate in the *Riverbend* case.

### **Summary**

The working group endorsed the above recommendations on consent or by majority vote. State agency members announced on voting day that they would abstain from voting on policy. Reps. Mary Mushinsky and Mark Anderson thanked the members for their extensive and respectful work over four months, and for submitting references to the administrator for members and the public. Rep. Mushinsky submitted the working group's voted recommendations to the Environment Committee House chairman, John-Michael Parker, vice chairman Aundre Bumgardner, and the Environment Committee's drafting attorney, Brad Towson, for crafting the 2026 legislation (HB 5334).

### **References**

References are posted on the Environment Committee's web page.