

In Support of Bill 5852 – AAC The Control of Lyme Disease

Testimony of Stephen R. Patton, Ph. D., Director of Landscape Programs

Before the Environment Committee – March 10, 2008

On behalf of The Nature Conservancy with 32,000 members in Connecticut, I am here today to urge your favorable consideration of Bill 5852 - AAC The Control of Lyme Disease. While the Conservancy's mission is to preserve the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive, this particular legislation is an example where our ecological objectives coincide with public health objectives. I'd like to direct my remarks to the effects that deer are having on the ecology of Connecticut's forests and offer some suggestions on how to reduce these threats.

The overabundance of deer in Connecticut poses a significant threat to the health and vitality of Connecticut's forests. Although deer were nearly extirpated in Connecticut 100 years ago, sound management practices adopted by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection helped restore deer populations in the State. The success of those practices, however, and other important factors have resulted in a deer population that is now in many places two to six times larger than what our forests can sustain over the long term.

The Nature Conservancy is acutely aware of the fact that deer overabundance has already had significant deleterious effects on some of the forest sites where we work including forests within the Saugatuck and Eightmile river watersheds. It is likely that deer overabundance is having a similar effect, though perhaps not as severe, on other forested landscapes in Connecticut.

Numerous studies conducted throughout the northeast including at the Conservancy's Burnham Brook Preserve by the late Dr. Richard Goodwin of Connecticut College have demonstrated the serious effects of deer overabundance on the forested landscape. Wildflowers and other plants have been nearly eliminated from the forest floor. Forest shrubs and trees are unable to grow and spread because they are either unable to survive the effects of severe grazing by deer or are stunted and unable to grow to a normal size that is beyond the reach of deer. Deer overabundance simplifies the ecology of our forests by eliminating many of the plants that can not tolerate repeated grazing. The loss of forest plants eliminates food and nesting places for many of the forest dwelling animals including small birds and mammals.

The Nature Conservancy supports Bill 5852 AAC The Control of Lyme Disease and makes the following recommendations.

First, we recommend that DEP conduct a thorough reevaluation of Connecticut's deer management program and its objectives, incorporating the most current scientific thinking about the ecological relationships of deer with their natural habitats as well as the relationship between deer and Lyme disease.

Second, we recommend that DEP establish goals for forest health and with the Department of Public Health, set goals for reducing the occurrence of Lyme Disease in Connecticut.

And Third, we recommend that DEP consider a range of new incentives to increase the annual harvest of deer in Connecticut and reduce the deer population to a level that is consistent with the goals established for forest health and Lyme Disease. These incentives may include providing additional hunting opportunities (e.g. Sunday Hunting), providing incentives for hunters to harvest more deer than they need for personal consumption, and developing a limited commercial market for wild venison.

Yesterday's sound wildlife management practices enabled the restoration of the white-tailed deer in Connecticut. We believe an updated management plan for deer can bring this important species back into balance with our forests of tomorrow and result in a substantially reduced number of cases of Lyme Disease in Connecticut.

Attached to the copies of my written testimony, I've attached suggested changes to the proposed bill for your consideration.

Thank you.

New Suggested Language

Section 1. (NEW) (*Effective from passage*) The Commissioner of

2 Environmental Protection, in consultation with the Commissioner of

3 Public Health and all other relevant state agency commissioners shall develop and implement a comprehensive program to reduce the occurrence of Lyme disease in Connecticut.

The program will among other considerations, make recommendations regarding necessary measures to achieve and maintain deer populations at a level that greatly reduces the incidence of Lyme disease and deer - vehicle accidents, and restores forest health; and increases public awareness concerning the critical role of deer in perpetuating the Lyme disease epidemic; and provide assistance to municipalities to achieve these goals.