

To our State Park Leadership Team-

We are passionate about our exceptional State Park & Forest Recreation areas. Most of us have dedicated our lives to the operation and maintenance of these facilities for more than two decades. Ensuring that CT's residents had access to a clean and healthy environment during the pandemic was the reason we put ourselves on the frontline, facing an ever-present danger, in order to provide a safe environment for the public to find respite from the cabin-fever and lockdowns across the state. That said, for many years it has been the consensus amongst field staff that our state-wide system of parks, forests, museums, and nature centers was failing. We have watched for decades as staff levels decreased, workloads increased, and infrastructure crumbled across the State. After years of being asked to 'do more with less' it was finally presented in recent years that it may have come time to 'do less, with less' - only a reduction in expectations and workload has never come into fruition. The current state of affairs in our State Park operation have reached an all-time low, and at the present we have come to realize that in fact our operation has now failed. And while we realize that you are working hard to find solutions to these many issues, it is important to understand the degree to which this dramatic decline has affected our entire staff, and that in fact the method by which we operate is no longer sustainable. Please allow us to share our concerns, so that we may together develop a solution to preserve and protect the resources we all cherish for future generations.

We have failed to raise the cap on the wages of our Seasonal Employees for at least 20 years, which has directly impacted our ability to recruit and retain qualified employees to supervise campgrounds, oversee lifeguards, and provide essential park maintenance functions. As a result, these considerable responsibilities have now shifted to our limited permanent staff of Park Supervisors, Maintainers, and very minimal support staff.

In just the past five years, we have failed to retain as many as 9 permanent employees – 1/7th of our entire remaining Field Operations workforce - who have elected to take voluntary demotions, or leave state service entirely (this on top of numerous retirement, promotional, and medical vacancies created). This level of premature exodus from these highly coveted positions is unprecedented and demonstrates the lack of support for and understanding of the work being done by Park's Division field employees. This, coupled with decades of attrition, present an incredible deficit: **40% in the last 20 years alone**. This places considerable added burden on the remaining workforce, most of whom have worked with the department for decades and are on the tail-end of their own careers. Ultimately, this has contributed to considerable burnout and has buried our team in a severe state of low morale.

Less than two decades ago park management units each had an average of three maintenance employees. Today, most units have been reduced to only a single maintainer, with some not having a permanent maintenance employee assigned to the unit at all. The expectation that someone performing maintenance work should do so independently is unrealistic and unsafe, and has required us to combine forces in the form of time-consuming work parties that had formerly been used to complete major infrastructure projects such as roofing or building bridges, and now must be used to accomplish even the most routine and mundane park projects such as assembling picnic tables, or clearing overgrown areas of brush.

Since its inception, our system has served to properly train and prepare new employees, both permanent and seasonal, for the diversity of responsibilities and expectations placed upon them in the field through on-the-job learning. This method has now failed as a result of this reduction in staffing, and we are no longer able to train entry level employees through in-house processes. A single Park's field employee is often tasked with a multitude of diverse responsibilities including human resource and payroll processing, fiscal administration, land surveying, contract review, health and safety oversight, crew leading, customer service functions, project management, law enforcement, wildland firefighting, medical first response, historical archiving, managing interpretive programs, office supervision, cash management, IT repairs, event planning, and maintenance roles (mechanic, plumber, electrician, carpenter, machine operator etc). A new employee faced with these responsibilities who only receives minimal training or support is destined to fail.

This exceptional loss of staffing has also forced us to turn to outside contractors in order to complete routine maintenance tasks, yet the process required for project approvals is extremely lengthy and time-consuming, often taking months to complete. Again, we routinely fail to review and fund these proposals in a timely manner - projects that are necessary for essential repair and replacement of our most critical and historic infrastructure. Similarly, we have failed to secure adequate equipment to maintain basic needs for transportation, snow removal, and other essential operations, and have become complacent with overreaching EFSS control and oversight in the equipment procurement and project review processes, while simultaneously accepting a lack of productivity and support from this Division in numerous other areas of need.

Exacerbated by the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, communication from leadership to field staff is often inconsistent. Short-term adjustments have led to the distribution of meeting minutes and virtual all-hands meetings; however, these efforts often fade off weeks later as the demands on all continue to escalate. The limited communication that does occur is out of date and out of touch with the desire of field staff to be 'in-the-know', so that we may be properly prepared for the added responsibilities and changes being implemented time and time again. We are also devoid of opportunity to share input during decision making processes in order to use our collective knowledge to best serve those affected by their outcomes

Other added responsibilities – ranging from frequent changes to the hiring process and the demands of learning Microsoft Teams, to the snow plowing of boat launches and other outer areas and extended camping seasons - have placed even greater time constraint on our ever-shrinking team of employees. Tasks that were once performed by others such as inventory, IT repairs, health and safety trainings and inspections, mower and equipment servicing, and more have now fallen squarely on the shoulders of our park's field staff, with firewood processing likely next to come. This is in addition to those numerous expectations already in place through our relationships with Forestry, Wildlife, Fisheries, and many others throughout DEEP.

These demands on our time have become too great to endure. Highlighted by the barrage of calls and e-mails that come at all hours from managers, subordinate employees, and the public, all with an expectation of immediate response, we believe it has come time to review those functions most essential to our existence and most depended upon by the public, and reduce the expectations and workload of our few remaining field employees. Recent suggestions to take time-off and ensure a balanced work/life association are not adequately supported with real systems necessary to allow such to be the case. We must address our bleak future as we prepare for the even greater staff deficit facing us within the next year and prepare the public for the same.

Our focus should be simple:

- Restore permanent field staff levels
- Increase wages for seasonal employees
- Reduce obligations to elected officials and the public
- Refuse assistance to other DEEP Divisions
- Secure funding for capital expenses to fund infrastructure repairs and purchase equipment
- Return recently added Parks Division field employee responsibilities to existing Hartford and BCS Field Support staff
- Centralized processing of generic e-mails and phone calls

We sincerely hope that conscious, consistent effort can be made to recognize and react to these ever-increasing concerns with the long-term resolutions necessary to realize the desired improvements. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you further and look forward to your response.

Respectfully,
Your Park Operations and Management Field Team

cc. Brian Wilson
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