

# Connecticut State Open Space 2023 Annual Report



Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection



*Prepared in accordance with  
Section 23-8(b) of the Connecticut General Statutes*



## Acknowledgements

### DEEP Land Acquisition & Management Unit Staff:

Lindsay Suhr—Office Director  
Brian Florek—Supervisor of Surveys and Mapping  
Allyson Clarke—Property Agent  
Matthew Starr—Property Agent  
Jamie Sydoriak—Environmental Analyst  
Cameron Clegg—Environmental Analyst

**Front Cover:** “Waterfront Dining,” Plymouth Reservoir, Plymouth.

By: Christine O’Neill – Honorable Mention

**Above:** “An Invitation on the Overlook,” Johnston Preserve, Lyme.

By: Wendolyn Hill - Winner

From the Diana Atwood Johnson Photo Contest

### State Natural Heritage, Open Space and Land Acquisition Review

#### Board:

Amy Paterson (Chair)—Executive Director, Connecticut Land Conservation Council  
Elanah Sherman—Representing the Interests of People with Disabilities  
Joe Welsh—Aquarion Water Company  
John Triana—Real Estate Manager, South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority  
John Piscopo—State Representative, CT House District 076  
Joseph Gresko—State Representative, Connecticut House District 121  
Karen Burnaska—Watershed Lands Advocate  
Linda Francois—Director and President, Bethany Land Trust  
Michelle Royce Williams—VP, Connecticut Water  
Rebecca Dahl—Planning Analyst, Office of Policy and Management  
Ronald Napoli—State Representative, CT House District 073  
Tim Abbott—Regional Conservation and Greenprint Director, Housatonic Valley Association  
Walker Holmes—Connecticut State Director, The Trust for Public Land

# Connecticut's Open Space Goal

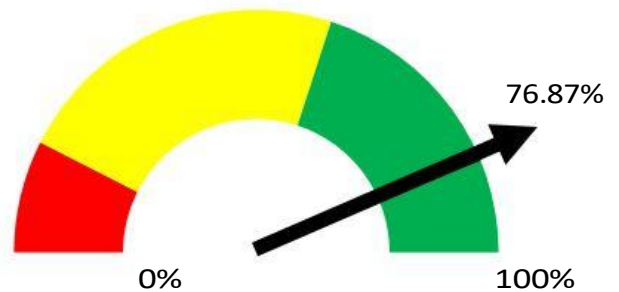
Recognizing the threat of loss or degradation of natural resources to land-use change and development, the General Assembly set a goal of preserving 21% of Connecticut's land base as public open space (Connecticut General Statutes Section 23-8). The Connecticut Comprehensive Open Space Acquisition Plan set a target to meet this goal by year 2023. To reach this goal, 673,210 acres across the state needs to be acquired as open space. Of the total open space goal:

- **10% (320,576 acres)** shall be held by the State of Connecticut (DEEP), and
- **11% (352,634 acres)** shall be held by DEEP's land conservation Partners (municipalities, non-profit land conservation organizations, and water companies).

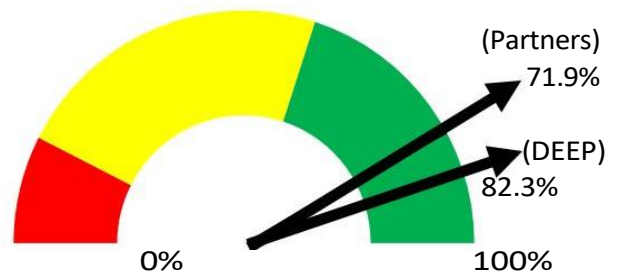
At the end of 2023, DEEP and its Partners together held a combined 517,511 acres as public open space, or 76.87 percent towards achieving the total statewide open space acquisition goal.

To reach their goals, DEEP must acquire 56,748 acres, and DEEP's Partners must acquire 98,951 acres to reach their open space targets.

## 2023 Statewide Open Space Status



Total: 517,511 ac.  
Need: 155,699 ac.



DEEP-held: 263,828 ac.  
Need: 56,748 ac.

Partner-held: 253,683 ac.  
Need: 98,951 ac.

### State (DEEP) Open Space:

As of December 31, 2023, DEEP held an estimated 263,828 acres of land in its system of Parks, Forests, and Wildlife Management and water access areas, or 82.3 percent of its open space goal. Of this, approximately 240,156 acres have been acquired in fee title. Acquisition of less-than-fee interests are atypical and include the purchase of conservation easements and restrictions.

### Partner-held Open Space:

As of December 31, 2023, DEEP conservatively estimates that its Partners held 253,683 acres, or 71.9 percent, of their share of the statewide open space goal. Of this, non-profit land conservation organizations held about 70,315 acres, municipalities held 85,498 acres, and water companies held 97,870 acres as open space.

# 2023 Statewide Open Space Land Acquisitions

In 2023, DEEP acquired 141.31 acres of land under the Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program, the primary vehicle for adding land to the State's system of Parks, Forests, Wildlife Management areas, water access areas, and other open spaces. These lands were acquired with generous assistance from private funding sources and private donations, leveraging about \$0.66 for every State dollar spent (**Appendix A**).

With over \$4.54 million in funding assistance from DEEP's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program, municipalities, non-profit land conservation organizations, and water companies were able to complete 23 projects, protecting 1,485.65 acres in 20 towns across the state (**Appendix B**).

## DEEP Land Acquisitions:

<b>8</b>	<b>141.31</b>	<b>\$0.66</b>
Properties acquired for new State open space	Acres of open space protected by the State	Match dollars leveraged for every State dollar spent

## State Funding to Partners:

<b>23</b>	<b>1,485.64</b>	<b>\$4.54 million</b>
Partner projects completed under the State's open space grant program	Acres protected by Partners under the State's open space grant program	Grant funding assistance to Partners

## Since 1998:

### 51,650+ acres

preserved as open space under the Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program.

### 41,500+ acres

protected by municipalities, non-profit land conservation organizations, and water companies under the **Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program**.

### 630+ Partner Projects

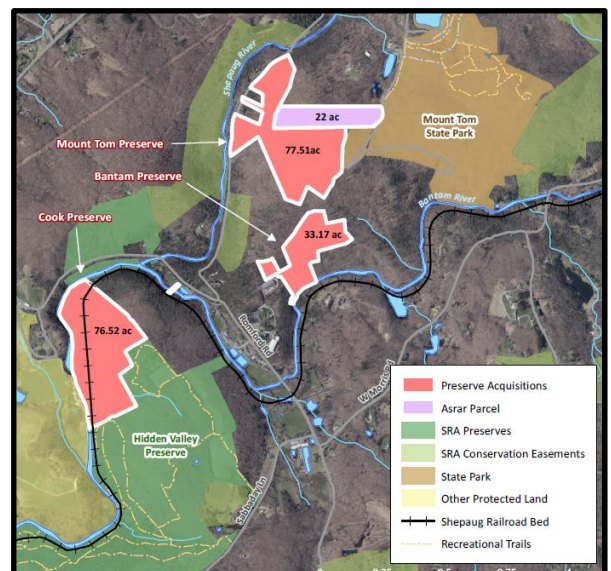
reviewed and approved for funding under the **Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program**.

### \$146+ million

provided in State funding to partners under the **Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program**

## Land Partners Connect Core Forest Parcels with Federal and State Assistance

This year, the Steep Rock Association expanded their 676-acre Hidden Valley Preserve through the acquisition of the Bantam, Cook and Mt. Tom Preserves, totaling 187.2 additional protected acres and connecting it to DEEP-owned Mount Tom State Park. The 33-acre Bantam parcel contains an alluvial swamp and cold-water stream within a floodplain forest. The 76-acre Cook parcel includes vernal pools and a 9-acre Oak-Pine Forest. The 77-acre Mt. Tom parcel, adjacent to DEEP's 231-acre Mount Tom State Park, consists largely of mountainous core forest, with four subpeaks measuring 990', 1040', 1060' and 1090' elevations. Receiving a combined \$736,00 in OSWA and \$1,202,500 in Federal Highlands Conservation Act grant funding for these three acquisitions, the partnership between local, State and Federal agencies played a crucial role in open space conservation.



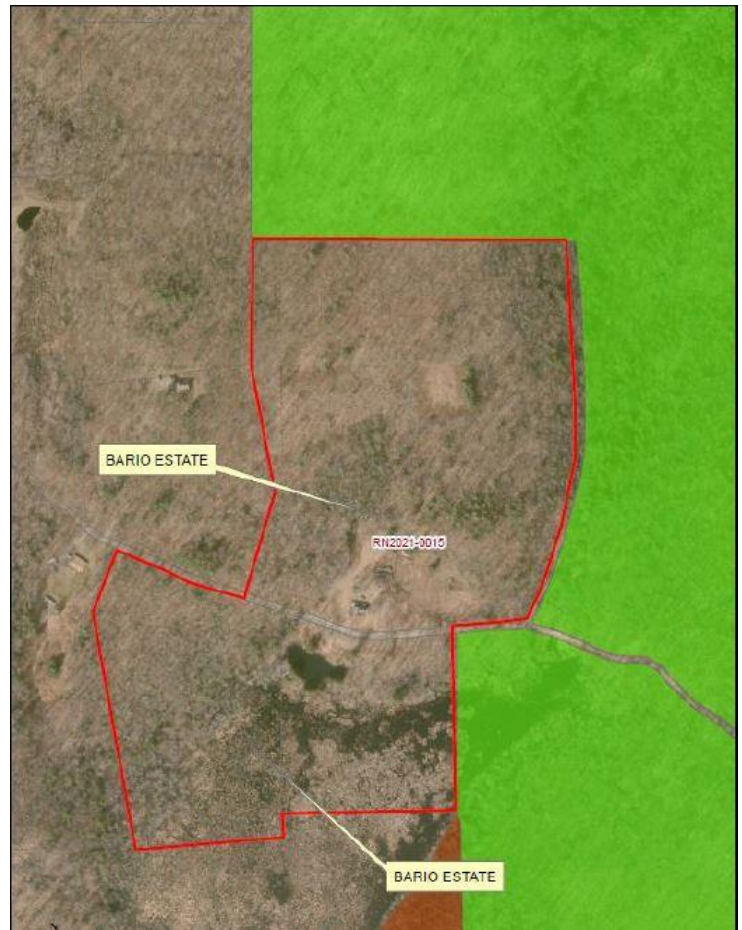
# 2023 DEEP Open Space Acquisition Actions

## State Property Acquisition Review

In 2023, DEEP evaluated 28 properties covering over 2,500 acres eligible for State purchase through the State **Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program**. There is a current backlog of over 100 properties covering approximately 6,700 acres that have been reviewed and approved for acquisition. Statewide real estate transaction trends saw an increase in demand for property sales, especially lots in rural and suburban areas, favoring sellers and making State acquisitions of larger parcels for open space very competitive. The limited number of acquisition staff at DEEP compounds these challenges, reducing the State's ability to identify, pursue and acquire all high-priority properties available.

## Expansion of Nipmuck State Forest Increases Wildlife Habitat

This year, DEEP acquired a 51-acre addition to Nipmuck State Forest from the Estate of John Bario, Jr. The property, split roughly in half by Skopek Road, was managed for years by Mr. Bario for wildlife and forestry purposes including maple sugaring. The southern parcel contains an open swamp, vernal pools, and mature forest. The property has had many recent wildlife sightings, including deer, beaver, fisher cat, otter, bobcat, bear, and numerous game bird species. This property provides additional road frontage and increases available recreational area in Nipmuck State Forest, particularly for hiking, bird watching and hunting. Furthermore, per the wishes of Mr. Bario's will, the entire proceeds from the sale are being donated to Ducks Unlimited, to further support game bird habitat conservation.



# The Green Plan: Connecticut's Comprehensive Open Space Acquisition Strategy

In 1997, the General Assembly recognized the environmental threat posed by changes in land use and set statewide acreage goals for land protection. In 2001, in partnership with municipalities and a wide variety of conservation organizations, DEEP developed the first Green Plan to guide land conservation efforts statewide. There have been several iterations of this plan over the years, each one building on past accomplishments and incorporating the latest innovations and opportunities. The last Green Plan was completed in 2016 with an expiration in 2020. With the onset of Covid and a large percentage of DEEP's staff retiring between 2019 and 2022, the development of a new plan has been delayed. However, The Land Acquisition and Management Office has recently rejuvenated the effort and is excited to move forward with the process of updating the Green Plan.



Right – Sandy Brook Forest Preserve, Colebrook Land Conservancy

Below – Quarry Hill Property, Cornwall Land Conservation Trust

## Looking Ahead — Revising the Green Plan

The Land Acquisition and Management Office worked with internal collaborators, external partners and other State agencies in 2023 to develop a comprehensive open space definition that is the basis for data collection for the new Green Plan. In early 2024, staff worked with the State GIS office to do an initial assessment of open space across Connecticut based on the new definition. Staff plan to work with a consultant over the next few months to rectify and finalize this data so it can be used for the next round of the Green Plan. Once that data collection effort is complete, DEEP will use those numbers to set new targets and goals for land acquisition for the next five-year cycle.

DEEP welcomes input from all stakeholders in the development of Connecticut's next planning document. View or download the Green Plan by visiting [www.ct.gov/deep/greenplan](http://www.ct.gov/deep/greenplan). Stay tuned to DEEP's webpage for news and information on how you can provide comments to improve the next Green Plan.



# 2023 State Assistance to Land Conservation Partners: OSWA

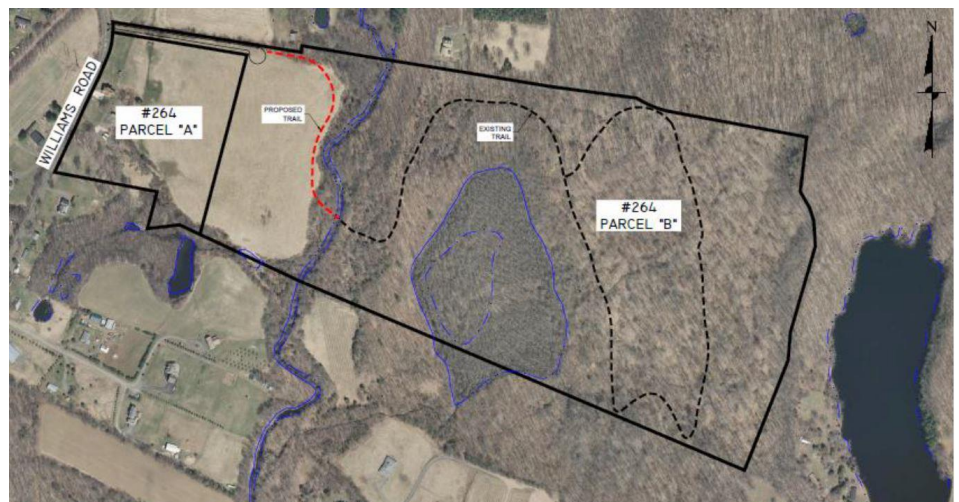
## The Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA)

In 2023, 23 projects were financially completed with over \$4.54 million in assistance from the OSWA Grant Program, permanently protecting 1485.64 acres (**Appendix B**). In 2023, DEEP announced grant awards totaling over \$3.7 million to support protecting another 1024.67 acres and 15 open space projects submitted to the 26th grant round (**Appendix C**). DEEP subsequently opened the 27th grant round and will announce those awards in the spring of 2025. OSWA leverages State, local and private funds to create a cooperative open space acquisition program. OSWA provides grants to municipalities and nonprofit land conservation organizations for the acquisition of open space land, and to water companies for the acquisition of Class I and Class II watershed land.

In consideration for grants, DEEP receives a conservation and public access easement over the property acquired to ensure that it is protected and available to residents as open space forever. To help DEEP support its partners in reaching their open space goals, the State Natural Heritage, Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Review Board convenes several times a year to review OSWA project selection criteria, policies, and procedures. The Review Board also makes State open space program recommendations to the Commissioner and others each year.

## Town of Wallingford Protects Drinking Water and Expands Public Recreation Opportunities with OSWA Assistance

With an OSWA grant of \$487,500, the Town of Wallingford was able to acquire a 95.3-acre property off Williams Road, to be classified as Class I and Class II water company lands. Within this parcel is the Muddy River, a Class AA watercourse, which meets the McKenzie Reservoir to the south. This acquisition protects an undeveloped watershed area from environmental degradation, contributes to water quality purification, protects a public drinking water supply and will provide new passive recreational opportunities via Williams Road. The town plans to create a loop trail on the property, connecting to an existing woods road, allowing for hiking, cross country skiing, nature photography, and stream fishing (the Muddy River contains a native brook trout population). A Wheelchair accessible pad and bench area is proposed at the southeast edge of the access drive, affording scenic views over the meadow and of migratory flocks that frequently land in this area. This parcel is part of an open space corridor, with other undeveloped private lands on the eastern side of Wallingford, providing new targets for future open space acquisition and conservation.



# 2023 State Assistance to Land Conservation Partners: UGCG

Since 2007, The Urban Green and Community Garden (UGCG) program has provided over 2.8 million in grants to eligible cities and towns across Connecticut. Addressing multiple open space needs in densely populated areas, these grants help renovate municipally owned lots into new or enhanced green spaces for recreation and local food production in urban neighborhoods. Among other improvements, grants can be used to towards small garden tool sheds, green infrastructure projects (rain gardens & bioswales), designing Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible walkways, and procuring materials for garden beds for use by children, people with disabilities, and senior citizens.



## English Street Community Garden, Jardin Comunitario – a Collaborative Success Story Assisted by UGCG

The English Street Community Garden, or Jardin Comunitario, is one of over 45 community gardens within the City of New Haven. Aided by grants from CT DEEP’s UGCG program, and partnerships with Gather New Haven, the city is transforming and expanding urban green spaces. These small plots are having a big impact on residents, providing gardening, recreation, and educational opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable. At the English Street Garden, training sessions from the Farm-Based Wellness Program offer information and instruction on how to produce your own healthy food, improving diets and stretching budgets at the same time. At English Street and similar sites throughout the city, Gather New Haven runs the Incubator Garden Program. This program allows former Farm-Based Wellness Program participants to cultivate their own garden plots, sharing knowledge and produce with neighbors, friends and family.



(Photos from [Gather New Haven](#))

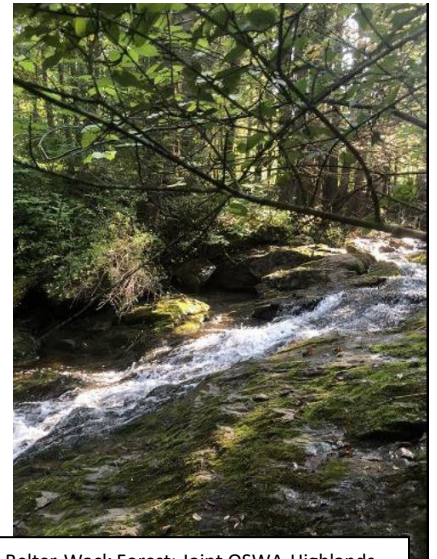


# Federal and Other Land Acquisition Grant Programs

In the acquisition of new properties for public use and benefit, DEEP makes use of available Federal grant programs to further leverage State bond funding. Staff in the Department’s Unit of Land Acquisition and Management identifies appropriate funding sources by matching resource values to program criteria. Staff also guide prospective sellers through the State and Federal land purchasing and grant processes.

## The Highlands Conservation Act

The Highlands Conservation Act Grant Program, administered through the US Fish and Wildlife Service, provides 50% matching funds to DEEP or its partners for the acquisition of lands within the Highlands region of Connecticut. The conservation of lands within this region helps preserve core forest habitat, thriving wildlife populations, clean drinking water resources and abundant recreational opportunities for the public. This grant program is an increasingly important asset for DEEP acquisitions within Connecticut’s share of the region. Since its inception in 2004, DEEP and its partners have utilized over \$13,219,600 in funding to protect over 5,800 acres of open space within the Connecticut Highlands region. In 2023, DEEP managed to pair \$2,060,100 in Highlands funds with our OSWA program to assist DEEP’s partners in the purchase of seven properties in five towns, protecting 643 acres of open space (**Appendix B**).



Belter-Wack Forest; Joint OSWA-Highlands Acquisition, Salisbury Land Trust

## The George Dudley Seymour Trust

George Dudley Seymour was an American historian, patent attorney, antiquarian, author, city planner and noted authority and foremost expert on Nathan Hale, the American Revolutionary War hero. Dying in 1945, Seymour’s last will and testament bequeathed the remainder of his material worth and any future income (after providing for friends, family and various charitable endeavors) towards a trust dedicated to the purchase of public lands and the preservation of Connecticut’s history within the State of Connecticut. To that end, DEEP puts forward recommended properties to be purchased by this trust, that will expand public open spaces and preserve Connecticut’s rich history.



In 2023, DEEP acquired three properties with funds from the George Dudley Seymour Trust, using \$561,000 of trust funds to add 66 acres of open space to our State Parks and Forests (**Appendix A**). This includes a 28.45-acre addition to Cockaponset State Forest, protecting the “Leatherman Caves” area of historical significance (above); a 3.28-acre addition to West Rock Ridge State Park; and an impressive 34.26-acre acquisition to expand the recreational opportunities at the popular Devils Hopyard State Park (left).

# 2023 State Land Encroachment Resolutions

DEEP established and follows an Encroachment Enforcement Response Policy in an effort to preserve and protect lands held in public trust as protected open space. Public Act 06-89 (Connecticut General Statutes Section 52-560a) was enacted to better protect public open space by allowing the Department to seek relief from those who encroach upon it. Encroachment means to conduct an activity that damages or alters the land, vegetation or other features without appropriate permission. The act applies to all publicly held open space, including any land in which the State, municipalities, or nonprofit land conservation organizations hold a conservation easement interest. Under this act, encroachers can be directed to restore, and/or pay for the restoration of, affected open space areas. Cases of willful violation can have further damages charged equal to five times the cost of restoration.

In cooperation with other Divisions across the agency, staff at DEEP's Land Acquisition and Management Unit actively assists with identifying, documenting, and addressing known encroachments at lands held as open space by DEEP. DEEP has successfully resolved many of these encroachments. In 2023, notable effort towards encroachment resolutions included work to address unauthorized tree cutting, fence installation, and debris dumping at State Park and Forest lands.

## What's an Encroachment on State Land? For example ...



### *Unauthorized Construction*

- Sheds, docks, fences, other structures;
- Building or improving trails, roads, driveways;
- Landscaping;
- Utilities



### *Alterations*

- Destroying or moving stone walls;
- Cutting trees;
- Clearing vegetation;
- Moving or removing boundary markers



### *Storage/Dumping*

- Leaving vehicles;
- Tool depots;
- Material storage;
- Trash or debris piles

# Appendix A

## State Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program Acquisitions January 1, 2023, through December 31, 2023

Property Name	Town	Fee Acres	Easement Restriction or R.O.W	State Share	Cooperator Share	Cooperator (Grant Program)	Purpose of Acquisition
Stevenson	Stafford	3.47	N/A	\$515,000	N/A	N/A	Addition to Bradway Pond Flood Control
JBW Group LLC	Westbrook	28.45	N/A	N/A	\$273,000	George Dudley Seymour Trust	Addition to Cockaponset State Forest
Moriarty	Goshen	14.93	N/A	\$45,000	N/A	N/A	Addition to Goshen Wildlife Management Area
Klein	Hamden	3.28	N/A	N/A	\$78,000	George Dudley Seymour Trust	Addition to West Rock Ridge State Park
Estate of John Bario Jr.	Union	51.36	N/A	\$200,000	N/A	N/A	Addition to Nipmuck State Forest
Raccio	Hamden	3.24	N/A	\$90,000	N/A	N/A	Addition to West Rock Ridge State Park
LaMay	Haddam	2.32	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Donated addition to Cockaponset State Forest
Planeta	East Haddam	34.26	N/A	N/A	\$210,000	George Dudley Seymour Trust	Addition to Devils Hopyard State Park
<b>Total:</b>		<b>141.31</b>		<b>\$850,000</b>	<b>\$561,000</b>		

# Appendix B

## State Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grants Financially Completed by DEEP January 1, 2023, through December 31, 2023

Project Sponsor	Project Name	Town	Acres	OSWA (Highlands) Grant Amount
Steep Rock Association, Inc.	Bantam Preserve	Washington	33.17	166,500 (277,500)
Steep Rock Association, Inc.	Cook Preserve	Washington	76.52	376,000 (572,500)
Steep Rock Association, Inc.	Mt. Tom Preserve	Washington	77.51	193,500 (352,500)
Town of Pomfret	Frankfurter Property	Pomfret	130.66	187,250
Town of Wallingford	264 Williams Road	Wallingford	95.281	487,500
Winchester Land Trust, Inc.	Rosgen Property	Winchester	59.227	90,000
Killingworth Land Conservation Trust	Greer-Duffy Property	Killingworth	24.01	78,000
Town of Willington	Talmadge Estate	Willington	16.43	81,250
Colebrook Land Conservancy, Inc.	Sandy Brook Forest Preserve	Colebrook	140.7	117,500 (117,600)
Town of Suffield	Falkowski Stearns Property	Suffield	98.956	157,500
East Haddam Land Trust, Inc.	Saunders Preserve	East Haddam	69.473	198,250 400,000
Warren Land Trust, Inc.	Cunningham Road Property	Warren	237.07	(537,500)
Town of Colchester	Sablitz Property	Colchester	75.174	63,000
Southbury Land Trust, Inc.	Spring Hill Farm Preserve	Southbury	31.14	253,500
Bethany Land Trust, Inc.	Van Epps Preserve	Bethany & Beacon Falls	6.907	23,850
Town of Oxford	Vaill Property	Oxford	61.824	370,500
Sharon Land Trust, Inc.	Goldfrank Property	Sharon	81.28	329,000
Aspetuck Land Trust, Inc.	18 South Park Avenue	Easton	18.33	188,000 145,000
Salisbury Association, Inc.	Beltter-Wack Forest	Salisbury	47.235	(125,000)
Aspetuck Land Trust, Inc.	Montanaro Property	Wilton	9.839	398,125
Town of East Hampton	Christopher Property	East Hampton	7.51	46,500
Cornwall Land Conservation Trust, Inc.	Quarry Hill Property	Cornwall	31.556	123,200 (77,500)
Salem Land Trust, Inc.	Ransom Brook House, LLC Property	Salem	55.842	66,300
<b>Total:</b>			<b>1485.644</b>	<b>4,540,225 (2,060,100)</b>

# Appendix C

## State Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Program Grant Awards Announced 2023

Project Sponsor	Project Name	Town	Acres	Grant Amount
Borough of Naugatuck	Wilmot Property	Naugatuck	45.00	\$135,000.00
Winchester Land Trust	Cannavo Springs Watershed	Winchester	25.00	\$90,000.00
Town of Hebron	O'Connor Property	Hebron	115.36	\$312,650.00
North Branford Land Conservation Trust	Beech Street & Poms Lane Properties	North Branford	37.00	\$385,450.00
Norfolk Land Trust, Inc.	Lovers Lane (Borden) Property	Norfolk	82.00	\$234,000.00
Salem Land Trust, Inc.	Stahlschmidt Property	Salem	47.50	\$139,750.00
Wyndham Land Trust, Inc.	Townshend Phase 4	Windham	227.00	\$354,120.00
East Haddam Land Trust, Inc.	Honey Hill Farm	East Haddam	123.37	\$321,100.00
Town of Guilford	East River Preserve	Guilford	26.80	\$174,200.00
Cornwall Land Conservation Trust, Inc.	Quarry Hill	Cornwall	31.56	\$123,200.00
Town of East Haddam	Kronberg Property	East Haddam	74.00	\$243,100.00
New Hartford Land Trust, Inc.	135 Southeast Road	New Hartford	77.30	\$227,500.00
Steep Rock Association	Pinnacle Cliffs	Washington	30.46	\$406,250.00
Morris Land Trust, Inc.	Humphrey Farm Reserve	Morris	37.01	\$240,500.00
Northwest CT Land Conservancy	Ledges Preserve	Brookfield	45.31	\$325,000.00
<b>Total:</b>			<b>1024.67</b>	<b>\$3,711,820.00</b>