

Connecticut State Open Space 2022 Annual Report

Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection



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



Acknowledgements

Hummingbird Garden Attraction- Libby Lord
Diana Atwood Johnson Photo Contest 2022- Best in Show

DEEP Land Acquisition & Management Unit Staff:

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

State Natural Heritage, Open Space and Land Acquisition Review Board:

- Amy Paterson (Co-Chair)—Executive Director, Connecticut Land Conservation Council
- Eric Hammerling (Co-Chair)—Executive Director, Connecticut Forest and Park Association
- Elanah Sherman—Representing the Interests of People with Disabilities
- Rebecca Dahl —Planning Analyst, Office of Policy and Management
- Joe Welsh—Aquarion Water Company
- John Triana—Real Estate Manager, South Central Connecticut Regional Water Authority
- Joseph Gresko—State Representative, Connecticut House District 121
- Karen Burnaska—Watershed Lands Advocate
- Linda Francois—Director and President, Bethany Land Trust
- 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 (CGS 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).

Together, DEEP and its Partners hold a combined 515,884 acres as public open space, or 76.67 percent towards achieving the total statewide open space acquisition goal, according to 2022 data.

To reach these goals, DEEP must acquire 56,889 acres, and DEEP's Partners must acquire 100,437 acres to reach their open space targets.

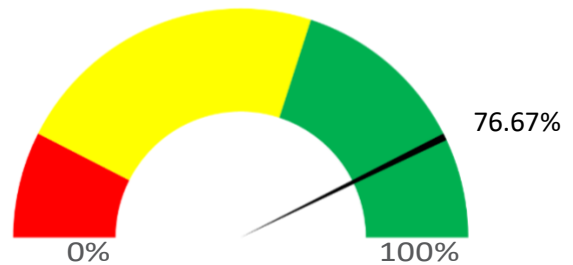
State (DEEP) Open Space

As of December 31, 2022, DEEP holds an estimated 263,687 acres of land in its system of Parks, Forests, and Wildlife Management and water access areas, or 82.25 percent of its open space goal. Of this, approximately 240,015 acres have been acquired in fee title. Acquisition of less-than-fee interests are atypical and include the purchase of conservation easements and restrictions.

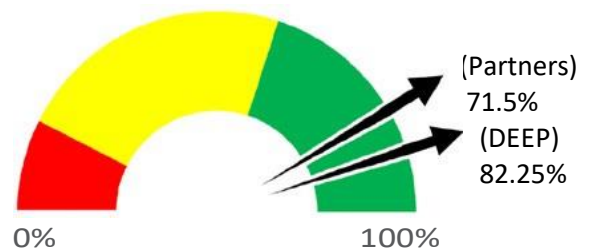
Partner-held Open Space

As of December 31, 2022, DEEP conservatively estimates that its Partners hold 252,197 acres, or 71.5 percent, of their share of the statewide open space goal. Of this, non-profit land conservation organizations hold about 69,410 acres, municipalities hold 85,012 acres, and water companies hold 97,775 acres as open space.

2022 Status Statewide Open Space Goal



Total: 515,884 acres
Need: 157,326 acres



DEEP-held: 263,687 acres
Need: 56,889 acres
Partner-held: 252,197 acres
Need: 100,437 acres

Front Cover: View from an Old Beaver Den – Russel Caron
 Photo taken at the Gateway to the Airline Trail – protected by the Colchester Land Trust. One of the winners of the 2022 Diana Atwood Johnson OSPA Photo Contest, held in partnership with the Connecticut Land Conservation Council.

2022 Statewide Open Space Land Acquisitions

In 2022, DEEP acquired 587.4 acres of land under the Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program (RNHTP), the primary vehicle for adding land to the State's system of parks, forests, wildlife areas, water access areas, and other open spaces. These lands were acquired with generous assistance from federal and private funding sources and private land donations, leveraging about \$4.52 for every State dollar spent (**Appendix A**).

With over \$4.46 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 12 projects, protecting 1,612 acres across the state (**Appendix B**).

DEEP Land Acquisitions

5	1,073.17	\$5.20
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

12	1,612.89	\$4.46 million
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

51,500+ acres

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

40,000+ acres

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

610+ Partner Projects

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

\$141+ million

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

Highlands Grants and Local Donations Protect over 500 Acres in Cornwall

Owned by three separate entities, and split into eight parcels, the Fletcher Property, as it is known, consists of a forested 536-acre tract of land abutting Wyantanuck State Forest and the privately owned Dark Entry Forest. DEEP's RNHTP program coordinated the acquisition of these parcels, utilizing \$1,215,000 in funding from the Highlands Act Grant program, and with generous assistance from local sources, totaling \$174,500 in donations. Situated along Flat Rocks Road, Cook Road, and Great Hollow Road, this acquisition will greatly improve access to the State Forest and provide increased recreational activities including hiking, fishing, hunting, and bird watching.



2022 DEEP Open Space Acquisition Actions

State Property Acquisition Review

DEEP evaluated 14 properties covering over 263 acres eligible for State purchase through the State **Recreation and Natural Heritage Trust Program**. There are currently over 100 properties covering thousands of acres that have been reviewed and approved for acquisition. Statewide real estate transaction trends saw continued demand for land, especially in rural and suburban areas, making State acquisitions of larger parcels for open space very competitive. The acquisition process is rigorous and consumes a large amount of the Land Acquisition and Management Unit's (LAM) limited staff resources. This, in turn, restricts the number of properties that could be purchased by DEEP.

Federal Partnership Protects 269 Acres and a Rare Geological Formation in Canaan

The Thomas Property in Canaan is composed of 269 acres of open space, split into two parcels along Route 7 and planned as additions to the Housatonic State Forest and Robbins Swamp Wildlife Management Area.

The eastern parcel, a 74.8 acre addition to Housatonic State Forest, consists of a steep climb to the ridgeline of the Canaan Mountains. The parcel contains northern and mixed hardwood forest with acidic rocky outcrops, scrub oak and grassy bald sub-habitats. The parcel offers increased access to Housatonic State Forest, as well as protection of a natural bridge: a rare geological formation where softer substrates are washed away, leaving a bridge or arch formation of natural stone.

The western parcel is a 194.3 acre addition to Robbins Swamp Wildlife Management Area, the largest inland wetland complex in Connecticut. This land features gentle slopes down to wetland and swamp area. Noted habitats include northern white cedar swamps, calcareous and forested wetlands.

This acquisition was funded through a \$395,000 Highlands Conservation Act grant, covering 50% of the cost. The protection of these lands ensures conservation of core forest and an important passageway for wildlife movement between lowland and upland habitats.



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 2015 with an expiration in 2020. With the onset of COVID-19 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.



Looking Ahead — Revising the Green Plan

The Land Acquisition and Management Office will be working with internal collaborators, external partners and other State agencies in the coming months to develop a comprehensive open space definition that will be the basis for data collection for the new Green Plan. Staff plan to do a comprehensive assessment of the already protected land across the state to understand what percentage of the state's 21% goal has been accomplished. 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. Stay tuned to DEEP's webpage for news and information on how you can provide comments on how to improve the next Green Plan.



2022 State Assistance to Land Conservation Partners: OSWA

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

In 2022, 12 projects were financially completed with over \$4.46 million in assistance from the OSWA Grant Program, permanently protecting 1,612.89 acres (**Appendix B**). In the spring of 2023, DEEP announced grant awards totaling \$3.7 million to support protecting another 1025.11 acres across 16 open space projects submitted to the 25th grant round (**Appendix C**). DEEP subsequently opened the 26th grant round and will announce those awards in the spring of 2024. 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.

To ensure public access and permanent protection, DEEP acquires a conservation and public access easement over every property receiving a grant. Class I watershed land is exempt from the public access requirement for public health reasons. DEEP is willing to accept limited public access (at the discretion of the Commissioner) when a conservation easement is purchased on land where it would be disruptive of active agricultural activity. 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.

OSWA and Highlands Team up to Double Preserved Open Space on Indian Mountain

With \$400,000 in OSWA funding assistance from DEEP, and a Highlands Act grant for \$681,000, the Sharon Land Trust acquired the 176 acre Von Ahn Property. Situated on the western reach of Indian Mountain off CT-361, the property features steep slopes to its peak elevation at 1,200 feet. With almost a mile of scenic ridgeline on Indian Mountain, the property provides wonderful viewsheds to the public. A 1.6-mile trail loop, 0.25 mile spur trail, and parking area facilitate the public's access to recreational opportunities including bird watching and hiking. This property contains 120 acres of core forest, including upland and riparian forested wetlands. Further, several headwater streams that drain into Indian Lake are located within the property. A wildlife habitat review suggests that the habitats within this parcel will support 11 State-listed rare species known to occur on or near the property. This acquisition more than doubles the current protection of Indian Mountain and completes a continuous belt of protected land between Indian Lake and Mudge Pond.



2022 State Assistance to Land Conservation Partners: UGCG

The Urban Green and Community Garden Grant Program

In 2022, the Town of Hamden was awarded \$46,875 in funding assistance from the State Urban Green and Community Garden Grant Program (UGCG) to create new community gardens at five of its Title 1, economically disadvantaged public elementary schools (**table below**). Each school has under-utilized and undeveloped space which will be upgraded with raised beds, stone dust pathways, vegetable and flower plantings, seating tables, and perimeter fencing. Like many other Connecticut towns during the pandemic, Hamden saw an increased demand and appreciation for fresh produce and community outdoor spaces. The creation of these community gardens will continue to foster public interest and knowledge in food production, sustainability, and ecology.

Since 2007, the UGCG program has provided over \$2.5 million in grants to eligible cities and towns across Connecticut. To address open space needs in densely populated areas, these grants help renovate municipally-owned lots into new and/or enhanced green spaces for recreation and local food production in urban neighborhoods. UGCG grants can be used to support gardening activities and promote accessibility, by purchasing small garden tool sheds, designing ADA-accessible walkways, and procuring materials for garden beds for use by children, people with disabilities, and senior citizens, among other improvements.

Municipal Sponsor	UGCG Project	Grant Award
Town of Hamden	New Elementary School Community Gardens	\$46,875
Total:		\$46,875

Filley Street Community Gardens Enhance Involvement and Spur Open Space Improvements in Bloomfield

With help from a \$32,500 award from the UGCG program in 2018, the Bloomfield relocated the Town’s community gardens to LaSalette Park, a more centrally located area with better soils, visibility, security, and available water resources for gardening. The improvement of the area included creation of 18 garden plots, including 6 raised beds, conversion of a historic building into a tool shed, land stabilization, walking paths, perimeter fencing, topsoil and mulch. In addition to this work, the Town also moved forward with a well installation project to provide water for the community gardeners. The project was an overwhelming success in improving community involvement in the gardening program and promoting further improvement to local open space and passive recreation opportunities.



Federal Land Acquisition Grant Programs

To acquire new properties for public use and benefit, DEEP uses Federal grant programs to further leverage State bond funding. Staff at LAM weaves these complementary funding programs together, find parcels that match multiple funding criteria, and guide prospective sellers through the State and Federal land purchasing 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 preserves core forest habitat, supports thriving wildlife populations, protects drinking water resources, and provides abundant recreational opportunities for the public. This grant program is an increasingly important asset for DEEP's land acquisitions within the region.

Since the Program's inception in 2004, DEEP and its Partners have utilized over \$11,159,500 in funding to protect 5,157 acres of open space of the Connecticut



Highlands region. In 2022, DEEP leveraged \$1,610,000 in Highlands funds for the purchase of four properties to protect 808 acres of open space (**Appendix A**). In addition, \$1,526,500 of the Program's funds was paired with OSWA funding for the purchase of four conservation easements protecting a total of 563 acres in Norfolk, Salisbury, Sharon and Litchfield (**Appendix B**).

The Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program is an important part of the land acquisition puzzle in Connecticut. The program targets valuable forestland for the purchase of

conservation easements. The program pays 75% of the appraised value of the property, with the owner donating the remaining 25%.

In 2022, the Forest Legacy Program helped to complete the acquisition of a conservation easement over the final property within Connecticut's Whip-Poor-Will Forest Legacy Project, providing a total of \$442,500 to protect 185.77 acres (**Appendix A**). The Whip-Poor-Will Woods (WPWW) project is a coalition of seven landowners who have agreed to protect 1,553 acres of forestland in Stafford, CT.

2022 State Land Encroachment Resolutions

DEEP 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 was enacted to better protect public open space by allowing the Department to seek relief and penalize those who encroach upon it. “Encroach” 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, a municipality, or a nonprofit land conservation organization holds 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 knowing and 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 LAM actively assist with identifying, documenting, and addressing known encroachments on lands held as open space by DEEP. In addition, DEEP’s Land Conservation Partners, private landowners, and members of the public have been instrumental in noticing and reporting suspected encroachments to LAM. In 2022, DEEP resolved a number of these encroachments, and made progress towards a resolution on many others. Notable efforts towards encroachment resolutions included work to address unauthorized tree cutting, the expansion of personal orchards or gardens beyond property lines, 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, 2022 through December 31, 2022

Property Name	Town	Fee Acres	Easement Restriction or R.O.W.	State Share	Cooperator Share	Cooperator	Purpose of Acquisition
Woodbury Mountain, LLC	Cornwall	109.33	N/A	\$0	\$560,000	USFWS (Highlands Act)	Addition to Wyantanuck State Forest
Ruth Turner Estate, LLC	Cornwall	54.71	N/A	\$0	\$80,000	USFWS (Highlands Act)	Addition to Wyantanuck State Forest
Thomas	Canaan	269.03	N/A	\$395,000	\$395,000	USFWS (Highlands Act)	Addition to Housatonic State Forest & Robbins Swamp WMA
Arnhold Foundation, Inc.	Bethel	79.35	N/A	\$0	\$0	Donation	Addition Colis P. Huntington State Park
JP Morgan Chase	Cornwall	374.98	N/A	\$0	\$749,500	\$575,000 – USFWS (Highlands Act) \$174,500 – Private Donations	Addition to Wyantanuck State Forest
Bradway-Forster	Stafford	0	N/A	0\$	\$590,000	\$442,500 – USFS (Forest Legacy) \$147,500 - Donation	Conservation Easement: Whip-poor-will Project Area (185.77 ac.)
SUBTOTAL 2022	-	887.4	-	\$395,000	\$2,375,000	-	-

Appendix B

State Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grants Financially Completed by DEEP January 1, 2022 through December 31, 2022

Project Sponsor	Project Name	Town	Acres	Grant Amount
Town of Ridgefield	Bear Mountain Open Space	Ridgefield	13.83	\$42,000
Norfolk Land Trust	Kopp Property	Norfolk	234.57	\$328,000 (+ \$258,500 Highlands)
E. Lyme LCT	Nehantic Nature Preserve	E. Lyme & Montville	301.78	\$560,000
City of Bristol & Environmental Learning Centers of CT	Pigeon Hill Property	Bristol & Burlington	64.11	\$850,800
Salisbury Association Inc.	Belter Lime Rock	Salisbury	114.39	\$250,000 (+ \$268,000 Highlands)
Town of Westbrook	Toby Hill VIII	Westbrook	130.11	\$315,000
Guilford LCT	Bartlett Preserve / Bluff Head Property	Guilford	80.08	\$127,500
Sharon LT, Inc.	Von Ahn Property	Sharon	175.6	\$400,000 (+ \$681,000 Highlands)
Town of Hebron	Bernstein Property	Hebron	214.2	\$299,960
Ripley, Inc.	Horse Show Meadow	Litchfield	38.57	\$310,000 (+ \$355,000 Highlands)
Aspetuck LT, Inc.	Fromson-Strassler Property	Weston	85.88	\$625,000
Town of Groton	Watrous Property	Groton	159.79	\$352,000
SUBTOTAL 2022	-	-	1612.89	\$4,460,260 (\$1,562,500 Highlands)

Appendix C

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

Project Sponsor	Project Name	Town	Acres	Grant Amount
Borough of Naugatuck	Wilmot Property	Naugatuck	45	\$135,000
Winchester Land Trust	Cannavo Springs Watershed Property	Winchester	25	\$90,000
Town of Hebron	O'Connor Property	Hebron	115.36	\$312,650
North Branford Land Conservation Trust	Beech Street & Poms Lane Properties	North Branford	37	\$385,450
Norfolk Land Trust, Inc.	Lovers Lane (Borden) Property	Norfolk	82	\$234,000
Salem Land Trust, Inc.	Stahlschmidt	Salem	47.5	\$139,750
Wyndham Land Trust	Townshend Phase 4	Pomfret	227	\$354,120
East Haddam Land Trust	Honey Hill Farm	East Haddam	123.37	\$321,100
Guilford	East River Preserve	Guilford	26.8	\$174,200
Cornwall Conservation Trust, Inc.	Quarry Hill	Cornwall	32	\$144,950
Town of East Haddam	Kronberg Property	East Haddam	74	\$243,100
New Hartford Land Trust, Inc.	135 Southeast Road	New Hartford	77.3	\$227,500
Steep Rock Association	Pinnacle Cliffs	Washington	30.46	\$406,250
Morris Land Trust	Humphrey Farm Reserve	Morris	37.01	\$240,500
NW CT Land Conservancy	Ledges Preserve	Brookfield	45.31	\$325,000
Total	-	-	1025.11	\$3,733,570