

March 3, 2026

Esteemed Chairs Lopes and Parker,  
Members of the Environment Committee:

On behalf of the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG), I appreciate the opportunity to testify in **strong support** of Raised Bill 5334, *An Act Concerning Riparian Areas*.

Five years ago, WestCOG issued a comprehensive report examining riparian corridor protections in Connecticut and across New England. One of the most striking findings of that research was that Connecticut is the only state in New England without statewide riparian buffer protections, and one of only a small number of states nationally without such a framework.

That gap is significant.

The scientific evidence supporting riparian buffers—the naturally vegetated lands immediately adjacent to rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds—is not speculative. It is extensive, peer-reviewed, and remarkably consistent. Studies across the eastern United States demonstrate that forested riparian buffers in the range of 60–100 feet can reduce nitrogen and phosphorus loading by 70 percent or more, while also dramatically reducing sediment transport and moderating water temperatures critical for cold-water habitat.

These areas are not simply “undeveloped land”. They are critical environmental infrastructure. Forested and naturally vegetated riparian areas:

- Filter nutrients and pollutants before they enter waterways;
- Stabilize streambanks and reduce erosion;
- Attenuate stormwater and reduce downstream flooding;
- Regulate water temperature;
- Protect public drinking water sources; and
- Reduce property damage during severe storms.

And they do so passively, without pumps, pipes, concrete, or long-term capital maintenance costs. If we lose these ecosystem services, the alternatives are not hypothetical. They are costly.

The alternatives are:

- Degraded water quality and increased hypoxia;
- Increased flooding and property damage;
- Or the construction of engineered infrastructure to replicate, imperfectly and expensively, the functions that intact riparian systems already provide at no cost to taxpayers.

Protecting the riparian buffers we still have is far more economical than attempting to rebuild their functions after they are lost.

HB 5334 addresses this gap in a careful and prudent way. Rather than creating a new regulatory regime, the bill extends the existing Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Act to explicitly recognize riparian areas and natural vegetative cover as integral components of water resource protection. The Inland Wetlands Act has operated successfully for more than fifty years. It is well understood by municipalities, practitioners, and the courts. It is balanced. It is durable. It has withstood judicial scrutiny and provided a stable framework for protecting Connecticut's water resources.

HB 5334 does not impose a rigid statewide buffer width. Instead, it modernizes statutory findings, clarifies definitions, strengthens review standards, and allows for graduated protections based on ecological benefit. It incorporates consideration of drinking water, cold water habitat, and resilience to severe storms and extreme weather, reflecting the environmental realities facing our communities today.

Connecticut has invested heavily in wastewater treatment upgrades and stormwater compliance programs over the past several decades. Yet one of the most cost-effective water quality tools available, the protection of vegetated riparian areas, has not been explicitly recognized in state law. HB 5334 corrects that omission in a measured and legally sound way.

This bill brings Connecticut into alignment with longstanding practices in neighboring states while respecting our institutional traditions. It strengthens protections using a framework that municipalities already understand and administer. For these reasons, WestCOG respectfully urges the Committee to advance HB 5334.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Francis R. Pickering". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Francis R. Pickering  
Executive Director