



NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS & ANGLERS

April 9, 2024

To Chairman Shanley and members of the House Committee on State Government & Elections

Re: BHA Support for RI-2024-H8148 – An Act Relating to Waters and Navigation – CRMC Reorganization

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting. Our members consider access to public lands and waters and protection of our natural resources top priorities, recognizing that both of these things are essential to our participation in, and the perpetuation of, our outdoor traditions.

In Rhode Island - The Ocean State - there is arguably no natural resource more important than our coastal zone. BHA members hunt for waterfowl, fish for striped bass, rake for quahogs, and enjoy many other recreational pursuits along the 400 miles of Rhode Island shoreline and the coastal waters that RI's Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) is assigned jurisdiction over.

Recognizing that Rhode Island's Constitution charges the General Assembly with managing the natural resources in the state as a "public trust", and that in most cases this responsibility is further assigned to agencies, councils and departments, it should be concerning to legislators that the public's faith in the politically appointed council has degraded to the point that RI's Attorney General is championing legislation that seeks to re-organize CRMC's structure and statutory authority – an effort that comes on the heels of a 2021 Legislative Study Commission exploring CRMC reorganization. Practically speaking, we are also concerned that CRMC's decision-making body, which is currently made up of volunteers who only meet for a few hours bimonthly, is no longer appropriate to address the state's complicated and extensive workload in a timely manner.

Unlike the current volunteer council, which is bandwidth-limited by its nature, an agency led by a director and staffed with full-time experts can be scaled to address the state's current and future coastal restoration and protection obligations, public access goals, and development permitting demands more effectively. This structure also eliminates the considerable work that currently goes towards educating volunteer council members, who are not required to have any background, education, or expertise in the coastal topics they make decisions on. Finally, an agency that is accountable to the executive branch, which is subsequently accountable to voters, is unlikely to repeat the numerous legal missteps that CRMC has made over the last several decades. In its current form, CRMC is only accountable when taken to court, which comes at a considerable cost to the public and is significant contributor to the lack of trust in its current structure.

The General Assembly must make a change to uphold its Constitutional obligation as the trustee responsible for Rhode Island's natural resources. **We urge the Committee, and ultimately the General Assembly, to support H8148**, which seeks to transfer CRMC's decision-making authority to a new "department of coastal resources", and to make the politically appointed council an advisory body.

Thank you for your consideration,

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