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CONTACT

## **Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection and Avalonia Land Conservancy Acquires Coastal Property in Stonington, CT**

The Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) and the Avalonia Land Conservancy today announced that they have jointly acquired a 16-acre parcel of coastal grassland on Wequetequock Cove in the Town of Stonington, CT.

The acquisition expands what is now a 2.4-mile corridor of contiguous protected open space extending from the Pawcatuck River on the Rhode Island border to Wequetequock Cove adjacent to the State of Connecticut's Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, Connecticut's largest and most ecologically significant coastal wildlife management area.

"The acquisition borders Wequetequock Cove, which is the least developed cove on Long Island Sound still largely in private ownership and within one of the most rapidly developing segments of Long Island Sound's coastline," said Daniel Esty, Commissioner of the DEEP. "The ~~land~~ Barn Island area is unique in the southern New England bird conservation area because it is part of a large area of unfragmented coastal forest much of which is in conservation ownership."

"Avalonia is proud to be a part of the partnership of agencies that worked together to save this beautiful and fragile habitat," said Avalonia President Duncan Schweitzer. "Our goal as a land conservancy is to preserve significant habitats and wildlife corridors and this expansion of the existing Barn Island Wildlife Management Area is a critically important addition to our preserves." Avalonia currently protects more than 2,800 acres within eight towns in southeastern Connecticut.

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The Barn Island protected open space corridor contains over 1,000 acres of contiguous conservation land including open fields, coastal forest, estuarine marsh, small pocket-beaches and the adjacent shallow waters of Little Narragansett Bay. Collectively, the conservation area provides habitat for 36 state and federally-listed animals and plants considered endangered, threatened or species of special concern. Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, which comprises the core of the area, is one of the most important tidal wetland scientific research sites on the eastern seaboard, with over 60 years of continuous research on how degraded tidal wetland systems respond to wetland restoration activities.

The \$1,512,500. purchase price of the property was largely funded by a grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Grassland Reserve Program. Contributions from an additional 8 partnering organizations including . . . (list: CT DEP, Avalonia Land Conservancy, Sarah Ann Martin Trust, Town of Stonington Conservation Commission, Stonington Land Trust, New Haven Bird Club, CT Ornithological Society, CT National Audubon Society).

"Connecticut's coastal municipalities are about 50% more developed than the state's average," said Jay T. Mar, State Conservationist for the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service. "The opportunities for coastal grassland conservation along a rapidly developing segment of our state's coastline are rare. Protection of lands along this estuary requires complex working partnerships involving stakeholders at all levels of government, as well as the conservation interests of private landowners," he said.

"We are very excited to be a part of the partnership that made this easement acquisition possible," said Mar. "Through the USDA Grassland Reserve Program, we were able to protect, restore, and enhance grasslands on this very important piece of property, and ensure the area is protected for future generations."

This acquisition permanently protects 16 acres of waterfront coastal grassland known to provide breeding habitat for grassland dependent birds including Bobolink, a State-designated *species of special concern*. The site's grassland field also includes the fringes of a 21-acre saltmarsh that is slowly migrating upland into the fields in response to sea-level rise in Fishers Island Sound. This marsh is part of a larger 350 acre tidal marsh complex extending from the Pawcatuck River to Wequetequock Cove. The marsh provides critical nesting habitat for the Saltmarsh sparrow, a *species of special concern* that has been targeted as a conservation priority due to the loss of its breeding habitat within the saltmarshes of the Northeastern United States.

The State's overall goal is to preserve 21 percent of Connecticut's land – or 673,210 acres --as open space by the year 2023. To date, 72% of the goal has been achieved with 485,816 acres having been designated as state or local open space



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