



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY & ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

OFFICE OF ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

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**To:** Colin Goegel - Supervising Engineer  
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**From:** David J. Fox - Senior Environmental Analyst      **Telephone:** 860-424-4111

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**Subject:** Groton - New London Airport Obstruction Removal Project

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The Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) has reviewed the Environmental Assessment (EA)/Environmental Impact Evaluation (EIE) prepared by the Connecticut Airport Authority (CAA) for proposed obstruction removal in the area surrounding Groton - New London Airport. The following comments are submitted for your consideration.

The document is titled an Environmental Impact Evaluation and was noticed in the Environmental Monitor as a Connecticut Environmental Policy Act (CEPA) document. However, section 15-120bb of the Connecticut General Statutes states that the CAA “shall not be construed to be a department, institution or agency of the state.” Since CEPA applies to state departments, institutions or agencies, it appears that CAA is exempt from its requirements.

The Department recognizes that the need to remove obstructions to the airspace surrounding airports to ensure their safe operation will require clearing of trees beyond the airport. We also understand the CAA’s challenge in striking the correct balance between public safety and resource impacts in developing a plan to remove obstructions. Our comments on the document focus on recommending measures to consider to further minimize impacts, particularly those at Bluff Point State Park and Coastal Reserve, the only property within the State of Connecticut’s system of protected open space so designated, due to the exemplary nature of the coastal habitat types present. We understand that a meeting will be called between our agencies to discuss these issues in further detail.

As noted in our scoping comments, any proposal that involves DEEP property would entail a grant of property rights from the Department. Requests for temporary or permanent property rights are reviewed by a multidisciplinary panel of DEEP staff that comprise the DEEP Property Management Review Team. After the NEPA/CEPA process has identified alternatives that avoid and minimize adverse impact, this review process can identify more specific mitigation measures for any project elements on DEEP property.

The Department is very concerned about the extent of tree removal proposed for the Bluff Point Coastal Reserve. Page 3-4 notes that FAA recognizes that off-airport clearing “is often impractical due to environmental impacts” and has defined a different approach surface, the Threshold Surface, to be utilized in such circumstances. The steeper slope of the Threshold Surface results in fewer penetrations, leading to reduced clearing.

The designations of portions of Bluff Point State Park as a Coastal Reserve and Natural Area Preserve were noted in our scoping comments; however, the additional protections afforded to these areas under the Connecticut General Statutes and through Special Acts of the General Assembly were not acknowledged in the EA text. The biological and natural heritage significance of the Bluff Point forest and Bushy Point sand spit justify the use of the more lenient Threshold Surface criteria. Protecting these resources to the maximum extent possible will be a critical factor in any decision by the Department to grant CAA property rights that could affect the condition of these critical resource areas.

Page 3-5 notes that clearing for Runways 23 and 33 could be limited to just a few tall trees (magenta dots), but that additional clearing of Approach Surface trees (blue dots) are recommended to prevent future penetrations of the Threshold Surface. CAA would work with DEEP to determine the extent of these removals. Bluff Point land should not be singled out for additional clearing to address any potential penetration of the Threshold Surface that may occur in the future based on possible growth of trees not currently penetrating this surface. The Department expects to limit tree clearing to the maximum extent possible, particularly within the Coastal Reserve, to satisfy the least restrictive FAA safety standard, using the existing height of trees, many of which are likely at or near maturity.

It appears that differential between the height of obstructions to the Threshold and the Approach Surfaces would be substantial, particularly in the case of Runway 33. The large area designated for selective removal within the Coastal Reserve has only one magenta dot and numerous blue dots. However, as noted on page 3-2, the dots are representative and there are likely many more tree penetrations. The area for selective removal ranges between 2400' to 3600' away from the runway end, so the difference in the surface heights between the 1:20 and 1:34 surfaces would be 50' to 75' (all numbers approximate). It would be instructive for reviewers if maps could be generated by using GIS data for ground elevation and Threshold or Approach Surface elevation that would depict the height of obstructions that would penetrate each of these surfaces at various locations. It would also be helpful if approximate numbers of trees to be removed could be estimated.

The nature of the forest cover at this location must be explored. Are the trees approximately the same height, with a fairly uniform canopy, or are there individual trees that are significantly taller? Would topping a few taller trees effectively remove obstructions of the Threshold Surface?

We also note that the Figure for the Runway 33 end depicts the Threshold Surface beginning at the runway end, not the threshold end, unlike the Figure for Runway 15. An extra 200' would raise the surface by 10'. In addition, if there are a significant number of Threshold Surface obstructions, could extending the threshold even further back down the runway (i.e., modifying runway 'declared distances') eliminate or significantly reduce required clearing? What are the potential safety and aviation impacts of such a scheme?

The Figure for Runway 23 does not depict the 20:1 Threshold Surface. The selective removal area within Bluff Point State Park does not include any magenta dots. Are there any obstructions within the Threshold Surface at this location?

Similarly, the Figure for the Runway 5 end depicts the 50:1 Approach Surface, but not the 34:1 Threshold Surface. It should be verified that the obstructions proposed for removal violate the more relaxed 34:1 standard. Because the island is an eroding landform, any tree removals must be accomplished in a manner that will not accelerate erosion.

Page 4-10 notes that additional consultation with DEEP is recommended and that specific surveys for fauna, particularly avifauna, may be warranted. As a member of the Property Management Review Team, the Wildlife Division will continue to provide guidance as cutting plans are refined. Among issues to be considered are:

- Use of Bluff Point area northeast of Runway 23 by migratory birds,
- Presence of winter owl roost near Bushy Point,
- Potential disturbance of shorebird nesting areas by accessing Bushy Point.

With regard to cave bats and breeding birds, page 5-9 states: “Based on other airport obstruction removal projects, direct impacts to these species may be avoided via use of seasonal restrictions (e.g., no tree cutting from May through August when these species are known to breed in New England). As such, significant impacts to critical species is not anticipated, as long as the winter owl roost is not disturbed. This conclusion will be reviewed by USFWS and CT DEEP to determine if biological surveys and potential mitigation are necessary.” In order to assure protection of these species, the Department recommends that this restriction be extended: from April 1 through September 30.

Over the years, the Department and ConnDOT had worked together to complete various projects and conduct operations at the airport in a manner that protected the biological diversity at Groton - New London Airport. DEEP anticipates that CAA, as the successor entity, will honor all legal commitments pursuant to statutory requirements made by their predecessor. We look forward to continuing collaboration with CAA toward that goal.

The document should include reference to the *Baker Cove Watershed Plan* (2011) and its recommended actions to address nonpoint source pollution loading to the adjacent Birch Plain Creek and receiving Baker Cove. Stormwater management, invasive species control, riparian buffer planting enhancements, and nuisance goose flock control are identified as mitigation measures for sources of excess water-borne pathogens and nutrients that have degraded designated water-based recreation uses and resulted in shellfish bed closures. Targeted management strategies are recommended in this water quality improvement plan. Airport management has provided preliminary input to assist with specific actions involving area goose flock management measures. Such stakeholder involvement will be coordinated by Eastern Connecticut Conservation District staff starting in Spring 2017 as part of a nonpoint source pollution management funding agreement with this Department. Proposed airport tree cutting and other obstruction removal measures, particularly along the Runway 15 approach, should carefully consider associated stormwater runoff controls and avoid creating additional favorable upland habitat conditions for geese and other waterfowl. Final obstruction removal plans should be shared with the coordinating Conservation District project staff to ensure that their area coordinated actions are not inadvertently undermined. Additional information can be found online at: [Baker Cove Watershed Plan](#).

Stormwater discharges from construction sites where one or more acres are to be disturbed, regardless of project phasing, require an NPDES permit from the Permitting & Enforcement Division. The *General Permit for the Discharge of Stormwater and Dewatering Wastewaters Associated with Construction Activities* (DEEP-WPED-GP-015) will cover these discharges. The construction stormwater general permit dictates separate compliance procedures for Locally Approvable projects and Locally Exempt projects (as defined in the permit). Locally Exempt construction projects, such as those undertaken by CAA, disturbing over 1 acre must submit a registration form and Stormwater Pollution Control Plan (SWPCP) to the Department. The SWPCP must include measures such as erosion and sediment controls and post construction stormwater management. The construction stormwater general permit registrations can now be filed electronically through DEEP's e-Filing system known as ezFile. Additional information can be found on-line at: [Construction Stormwater GP](#).

Thank you for the opportunity to review this proposal. If there are any questions concerning these comments, please contact me.

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