



NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS & ANGLERS

April 24, 2024

To Chairman Abney and members of the House Committee on Finance

Re: BHA Support for RI - 2024 – H7672 – Environmental Police Officers Retirement Plan

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting. Our members consider responsible management of the state's natural resources, including fish & wildlife and the habitats and ecosystems that they depend upon, a top priority. Further, we recognize that the quality and abundance of these resources is essential to our participation in, and the perpetuation of, our outdoor traditions.

With these things in mind, **the New England Chapter of BHA urges the Committee to support H7672**, which seeks to provide Environmental Police Officers (EPOs) employed by RI's Department of Environmental Management (DEM) Division of Law Enforcement (DLE) the benefits of the Municipal Employees Retirement System (MERS) police & fire plan.

As a state agency, DEM owns and manages ~56,000 acres of state parks, wildlife management areas, beaches, and campgrounds. While DLE is the primary law enforcement agency responsible for the facilities under DEM's management, their authority and responsibility also extend to state and federal fish and wildlife laws applicable statewide, and boating, fishing, and maritime laws in RI's coastal waters and the federal waters beyond. DLE conducts routine patrol functions statewide, 24/7/365, and provides first-response services for incidents that occur in undeveloped areas of the state and coastal waters year-round. Currently, DLE addresses this enormous responsibility with a fewer than 30 officers.

Under the current regime, EPO's must complete nearly four decades of service to collect full retirement benefits, which raises several concerns. First, many of the tasks that EPOs routinely undertake are dangerous and physically rigorous, and a retirement plan that requires officers stay on the job for such an extended period is detrimental to the officers themselves, to the members of the public who rely on them, and to the resources that they work to protect. Second, the lack of parity between the current EPO retirement plan and most other law enforcement agencies, which are enrolled in the MERS police & fire plan or enjoy similar benefits and duration of service, has created significant challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining EPOs, subsequently placing DLE's future in jeopardy.

To put it simply, RI must maintain a well-staffed, capable state-level law enforcement agency focused on our environmental, fish & wildlife and maritime laws. This is not only a priority for BHA's members, but is also reflected in RI's Constitution Article 1 Section 17, which charges the General Assembly with the duty *'to provide for the conservation of air, land, water, plant mineral, and other natural resources of the state, and to adopt all means necessary and property by law to protect the natural environment of the people of the state by providing adequate resource planning for the control and regulation of the use of natural resources of the state...'*

For these reasons, **the New England Chapter of BHA respectfully urges the Committee, and ultimately the General Assembly, to support H7672**, which would address the concerns that we have raised, and would improve DLE's ability to accomplish their mission of protecting RI's natural resources moving forward.

Thank you for your consideration,

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