



NEW ENGLAND CHAPTER BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS & ANGLERS

February 14, 2024

To Chairman Casey and members of the House Committee on Municipal Government & Housing

Re: BHA Support for RI - 2024 – H7060 – Protection of Sapowet Marsh Management Area

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) seeks to ensure North America's outdoor heritage of hunting and fishing in a natural setting. Rhode Island's shorelines and coastal waters are home to some of our most important natural resources, and provide some of our best outdoor recreation opportunities, and our members consider the protection of coastal resources and access to them a top priority.

With these things in mind, we urge the Committee to **support H7060**, which seeks to recognize Tiverton's Sapowet Marsh Wildlife Management Area (Sapowet WMA) and the adjacent coastal waters in RI General Laws as 'open space', and to protect the area from commercial development.

Currently, the State of Rhode Island owns and operates numerous facilities that provide recreational access to coastal waters. The vast majority of these are managed by RI's Department of Environmental Management (DEM), including the state's network of public beaches and several coastal State parks. Proportional to the rest of the state, Rhode Island's East Bay has an alarmingly low number of state-owned, state-managed coastal access facilities. In Bristol and Newport Counties there is precisely **one** state-owned, state-managed facility that has ample parking and provides access to a relatively undeveloped stretch of coast – and that is Sapowet WMA. To put it simply, Sapowet WMA provides exceptional public access for outdoor recreation in an area that is otherwise underserved, and as a result we believe that it, and the coastal waters adjacent to it, is deserving of exceptional recognition and reasonable protection.

Also of relevance, a commercial aquaculture proposal within the area described in H7060 has been pending before RI's Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) for approximately 43 months. BHA has been involved in opposing the proposal, and one pillar of our opposition relies upon the fact that the State has consistently invested public funds– through both state and federal mechanisms – to acquire and develop approximately 300 acres for the public's use and enjoyment, including facilities to access the adjacent coastal waters. Last year CRMC voted to send the issue to their hearing officer as a 'contested' case, although it was unclear what points of opposition, specifically, were 'contested', or which of the parties that filed objections might be involved in or have access to the hearing officer's examination of the issue. As a result, it is not clear what, if any, options remain for BHA and other parties to engage on a matter that is clearly important to the public, or whether our perspective is even being considered by CRMC at this point.

Respectfully, **we urge the Committee to support H7060**, which would recognize Sapowet WMA in RI's General laws and protect the area from commercial development. If passed, H7060 would resolve a years-long misalignment between one of RI's State agencies, which has made considerable investments in the area for the public's benefit, and another that seems to be either unwilling or unable to issue a timely decision on a commercial development proposal that would affect both the area itself, and the way that people currently use and enjoy it as a public resource.

Thank you for your consideration,

Michael Woods
Saunderstown, RI 02874
rhodeisland@backcountryhunters.org
Chair, New England Chapter Board
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers