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F O R I M M E D I A T E R E L E A S E

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**Public Meeting on July 20th to Consider Closure of MDC  
Lands to Recreation**

Rockfall, CT (July, 2010) – At a Public Meeting on Tuesday, July 20<sup>th</sup> at 5:30 p.m. at the West Hartford Town Hall, the Metropolitan District Commission's (MDC) Water Bureau will receive testimony from the public on the potential closure of MDC lands to recreation. In addition to providing recreational opportunities for an estimated 200,000 people annually at the West Hartford Reservoir system, the MDC provides water, sewer, and household waste services for its member municipalities: Bloomfield, East Hartford, Hartford, Newington, Rocky Hill, West Hartford, Wethersfield, and Windsor.

This public meeting was prompted by a jury award of \$2.9 million in May to a mountain bicyclist who sued the MDC after she was injured by driving into a pipe gate at the MDC's West Hartford Reservoir. The MDC is considering the closure of its lands to recreational uses to limit potential exposure to future lawsuits and avoid anticipated increases in their insurance premiums.

Eric Hammerling, Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association (the state's first nonprofit conservation organization, founded in 1895) suggests this issue is of statewide importance. "The MDC has the same legal status as a town and we are concerned that any decision to close MDC lands to public recreation will impact other towns which might close, limit use, or not open recreational facilities because of liability concerns. We'd like to see the state's Recreational Liability Statute be fixed so that the MDC and other towns will feel protected enough from personal injury lawsuits to provide critical recreational opportunities for their residents. We are doubly concerned because 3.5 miles of the 220 mile-long New England Trail (designated in 2009 as a national scenic trail and maintained by volunteers of CFPA) runs through the MDC's West Hartford property."

Charles Beristain, founding member of the Connecticut Chapter of the New England Mountain Biking Association and webmaster for an informative website called "savethemdctrails.org" added "I have been running and riding at the Res for over 12 years and have served on the MDC's Recreation Advisory Committee since 1998. In 1997-8, the MDC considered closing the Reservoir to biking, inline skating, and other wheeled uses because of liability concerns. We were able to keep it open through turning out lots of interested citizens at public hearings like the one coming up on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and by dedicating ourselves to maintaining the biking trails and encouraging safe biking use at the Res. We would like to see the Recreational Liability Statute fixed by the Legislature so that we don't have to fight this battle again and again."

In addition to approximately 3,000 acres of land hosting over 40 miles of paved and unpaved trails in West Hartford, the MDC owns another 7,000 acres around the Barkhamsted and Nepaug Reservoirs, at Lake McDonough, and along the Farmington River in Canton, New Hartford, and Barkhamsted. If all MDC lands were closed, it could also affect access to the Farmington River by anglers, access to Lake McDonough by boaters, and access by hikers and bikers to the Tunxis and other trails.

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*Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA), founded in 1895, is a non-profit organization serving Connecticut to protect forests, parks, walking trails, and open spaces for future generations. CFPA maintains the 825-mile Blue-Blazed Hiking Trail system. CFPA is also creating healthier communities through its WalkCT initiative. Visit [www.ctwoodlands.org](http://www.ctwoodlands.org) and [www.walkct.org](http://www.walkct.org) for more information.*