

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Joshua Schauer 271-3077

SB 592, enabling regional, conservation, and energy resource planning for habitat strongholds and wildlife corridors.

Hearing Date: January 8, 2026

Time Opened: 1:15 p.m.

Time Closed: 1:55 p.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators McConkey, Rosenwald, Watters and Avard

Members of the Committee Absent : Senator Pearl

Bill Analysis: This bill enables regional, conservation, and energy resource planning for habitat strongholds and wildlife corridors.

Sponsors:

Sen. Watters
Sen. Avard
Rep. C. Harvey

Sen. Rosenwald
Sen. Perkins Kwoka
Rep. Bixby

Sen. Birdsell
Sen. Altschiller
Rep. Ouellet

Who supports the bill: 167 individuals signed in support. Contact Joshua.Schauer@gc.nh.gov for further information.

Who opposes the bill: 5 individuals signed in Opposition. Contact Joshua.Schauer@gc.nh.gov for further information.

Who is neutral on the bill: 2 individuals signed Neutral. Contact Joshua.Schauer@gc.nh.gov for further information.

Summary of testimony presented:

Senator Watters, District 4

- Senator Watters introduced the legislation as the prime sponsor. He also proposed an amendment that corrected language in the bill and continued efforts from the past decade to support wildlife, including moose, bobcat, and native deer.

- Senator Watters stated that the legislation is intended to ensure healthy population sizes for protected species and to maintain clean, healthy natural environments.
- This effort reflects more than ten years of work by Fish and Game and is related to the state’s Wildlife Action Plan. The legislation is a response to shifting habitats caused by climate change and increasing land fragmentation.
- The bill builds on past legislation, Senate Bill 200 (2019), which originally established this framework and is formally recognized in the current legislation. The current bill expands upon SB 200 to ensure habitat connectivity and continued access to necessary resources.
- Senator Watters explained that several land trusts have played a significant role in this initiative, including work in the Great Bay region and toward central New Hampshire, as well as efforts by SELT. These organizations have focused on preserving key habitat strongholds necessary for maintaining healthy animal populations.
- As amended, he explained that the bill will include habitat strongholds under its purview. The existing language of “index” was determined to be outdated, so the bill now changes it to “inventory” instead which was requested by the conservation commission. The legislation focuses on the conservation commission and regional planning.
- Senator Watters pointed to the final page of the bill which specifies that planning groups may consult with NH Fish and Game. This provision is considered especially timely and aligns with the updated Wildlife Action Plan. The amendment Senator Watters introduced also removes references to transition corridors, in part due to concerns raised by Eversource.

Senator Avard asked whether the bill would impact the timber or forestry industry.

Senator Watters responded that it should not have an impact.

Senator McConkey asked whether the bill could affect large landowners who balance housing needs with conservation portfolios, and whether it could discourage homeowners from working with conservation groups.

Senator Watters stated that the bill would not impact any property rights.

Senator Rosenwald asked whether removing Section 5(b) would interfere with the designation of transition corridors.

Senator Watters replied that it would not, explaining that transition corridors are a separate issue from habitat connectivity and strongholds.

Mike Marchand, New Hampshire Fish and Game

- He said the department does not take an official position on the bill however, he shared some information regarding the planning of wildlife corridors and that

NH Fish and Game just released their wildlife action plan to address some concerns.

- He explained that the department has worked on mapping and the tools necessary for the planning process of wildlife corridors.
- He told the committee about their *Taking Action for wildlife* program where the department provides these tools for local community and land trusts to use. He provided a brochure to the committee outlining those tools.
- He asked the committee to consider under section five paragraph five, that the language be adjusted from “shall” to “May”. The groups in that section are groups Fish and Game actively work with and hope to continue that partnership, so the language change would be helpful to continue that work.

Senator Watters said they would be happy to make that language change to promote cooperation with the department.

Jim Obrien, The Nature Conservancy

- He mentioned that they have completed a lot of science-based research and mapping along the eastern United States Appalachian corridor, from Georgia all the way along east coast up to Maine. These studies have focused on the migration patterns of wildlife which have given researchers the ability to see larger areas of intact habitats.
- He said that this research is good for migration corridors and by enabling local communities to integrate these corridors in the area is very important to regional planning. He went on to say that the corridors are not just at the municipal level but go much higher than that.
- He pointed out that this legislation and the research that has come from it, is essential to protecting wildlife and wildlife resources in the future.

Griffin Roberge, Eversource energy

- Mr. Roberge said that Eversource had positive conversations with Senator Watters and support his amendment to the bill.
- He explained that the original bill had some language that was ambiguous and did require fish and game to consult with the Department of Energy (DOE) and Department of Environmental Services (DES) on the designation of the corridors and strongholds in approved transmission corridors. He added that it was subject to property owners agreements
- He said that it could raise issues between property owners and easement owners for which the Eversource transmission infrastructure goes through. The language correction is helpful to Eversource infrastructure and transition corridors.

Senator Avard asked if they were satisfied with the changes in the amendment.

Mr. Roberge said yes.

Barbara Richter, Executive Director of NH Conservation Agency

- She testified in support of the bill, stating that it prioritizes wildlife corridors and improves cooperation between agencies. She emphasized that it would benefit species such as moose, bobcat, and other wildlife that rely on connected habitats.
- New Hampshire Fish and Game provided a map of the wildlife corridors, and the speaker encouraged committee members to review it online. She stated that the bill would improve efficiency at the local level.
- She echoed Senator McConkey's request for a language change from "index" to "inventory," based on recommendations from professionals and subject-matter experts.
- She explained that protecting wildlife corridors can reduce flooding and soil erosion.

Senator McConkey asked about the term "prioritize," questioning whether corridor mapping would focus only on the big picture or on public land. He expressed concern about private property and homeowner rights.

Ms. Richter responded that land protection under the bill is voluntary. It remains up to the property owner and does not affect property rights. She added that it is not practical to protect every acre of land, as some areas are better suited for development, while others should be conserved. She said that the legislation shows the importance for making the connections between high priority areas that have the significant natural resources needed for these strongholds.

Senator McConkey stated that he was fearful the bill could become a building block for zoning restrictions.

Ms. Richter replied that the bill would serve as a planning tool and could encourage zoning benefits by helping communities make informed decisions.

Senator Avard asked whether the bill would prevent zoning in certain areas.

Ms. Richter responded that it would not prevent zoning, but would help communities allocate areas appropriately for zoning decisions. She explained that those decisions would be based on research and data and less on subjective materials.

Senator Rosenwald asked where the bill states that landowners' rights would be taken.

Ms. Richter responded that the bill does not include any language that removes landowner rights.

Senator Watters asked whether the corridors represent the already in-place routes animals and conservation lands use for migration and movement. He also asked whether the bill is just simply informational.

Ms. Richter confirmed that and noted that while it is already a priority for many communities, the bill would give them greater authority and clarity in zoning decisions.

Senator Watters asked to clarify whether that the existing chapter does interfere with property rights and said that he believed they currently do not affect them.

Ms. Richter reaffirmed that the bill would not interfere with property rights.

Jasen Stock, Executive Director of Timberland Owners Association (NHTOA)

- Mr. Stock said that their policy committee had some concerns with the legislation, and several issues were identified.
- He said that many landowners, particularly timberland owners, have a strong interest in wildlife and special areas. However, landowners do not want these areas publicly advertised and would prefer that information to be private.
- Local municipalities and private landowners already have corridors and special areas that overlap with the district, affecting how owners can use their property. He expressed some concern about redundancy in the legislation.
- He pointed to page 1, line 10 and questioned how “wildlife corridors” differ from existing designations and whether the bill draws attention to something that already exists. On line 26, he asked whether the language focuses on something unnecessary with the term “conservation including”.
- He added that on page 3, paragraph 7, what the use of “conservation” was and why the bill focuses on habitat “strongholds”. He said it should be for more than just one particular use of conservation lands.
- He stated that he is willing to work with the sponsor to clarify language and continue discussions with the committee. However, his organization opposes the legislation as written.

Senator Avard asked how privacy concerns would be addressed.

Mr. Stock said that privacy is a difficult issue because once areas are mapped, that information becomes public. He complimented the Natural Heritage Program, where landowners control the information being released to the public. He said this was a good model to look at.

Senator Avard asked whether there is an underlying concern about redundancy, and if so why his organization has a concern if it is.

Mr. Stock said the legislation focuses on this designation when similar concepts already exist and believes it is unnecessary. By changing the definition, it may create confusion as well as redundancy.

Senator Watters said the concerns raised could be addressed with relatively easy fixes, however he wanted to address the privacy issues mentioned. He asked if Mr. Stock could agree that the legislation does not give anybody the right to enter private property.

Mr. Stock agreed and clarified that the legislation would not license, provide access, or allow entry onto private land.

Senator Watters reiterated that, if passed, a conservation commission would not be allowed to enter private property without permission, as is the standard already.

Mr. Stock: confirmed that they would not be allowed on the property to do the mapping unless it was approved by the property owner.

Senator Watters said he understood the concern however, he stated the bill would not change existing prohibitions on access.

Mr. Stock agreed but clarified that publicly mapping trails or unposted properties could draw attention, increase visitation, and potentially cause damage once areas are identified as “special”. He provided an example of Black Gum swamp and if a property was found to have one of these natural habitats, it would be “loved to death”. He explained that property owners do not want unwanted visitation on their property due to attention from natural habitats being on their land.

Senator Watters stated that an ecological area is not the same as a wildlife corridor, since a corridor is not necessarily ecological, whereas a habitat stronghold is. He added that the distinction explains the language change within this legislation.

Mr. Stock said his committee of foresters and private landowners views special areas from a land-use perspective, reflecting a difference in approach. He continued to say that there is a difference in how his stakeholders see it and how the committee views it, in regard to land management.

Senator Watters asked about RPCs and the use of the word “conservation,” suggesting it could be changed to “habitat stronghold” to address concerns.

Mr. Stock said he was amiable to that change but would need to review that change further before responding.

