

SB 592 - AS AMENDED BY THE SENATE

02/19/2026 0516s

2026 SESSION

26-2174

08/05

SENATE BILL **592**

AN ACT enabling regional, conservation, and energy resource planning for habitat strongholds and wildlife corridors and creating a commission to study transferring ownership of the Winnepesaukee River Basin program to an alternative authority.

SPONSORS: Sen. Watters, Dist 4; Sen. Rosenwald, Dist 13; Sen. Birdsell, Dist 19; Sen. Avard, Dist 12; Sen. Perkins Kwoka, Dist 21; Sen. Altschiller, Dist 24; Rep. C. Harvey, Ches. 6; Rep. Bixby, Straf. 13; Rep. Ouellet, Coos 3

COMMITTEE: Energy and Natural Resources

AMENDED ANALYSIS

This bill:

I. Enables regional, conservation, and energy resource planning for habitat strongholds and wildlife corridors.

II. Creates a commission to study transferring ownership of the Winnepesaukee River Basin program to an alternative authority.

III. Creates the position of director of the Winnepesaukee River Basin Program within the department of environmental services.

Explanation: Matter added to current law appears in ***bold italics***.
Matter removed from current law appears [~~in brackets and struckthrough.~~]
Matter which is either (a) all new or (b) repealed and reenacted appears in regular type.

STATE OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

In the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty-Six

AN ACT enabling regional, conservation, and energy resource planning for habitat strongholds and wildlife corridors and creating a commission to study transferring ownership of the Winnepesaukee River Basin program to an alternative authority.

Be it Enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court convened:

1 1 Conservation Commission; Habitat Strongholds and Wildlife Corridors Included. Amend RSA
2 36-A:2 to read as follows:

3 36-A:2 Conservation Commission. A city or town which accepts the provisions of this chapter
4 may establish a conservation commission, hereinafter called the commission, for the proper
5 utilization and protection of the natural resources and for the protection of watershed resources of
6 said city or town. Such commission shall conduct researches into its local land and water areas and
7 shall seek to coordinate the activities of unofficial bodies organized for similar purposes, and may
8 advertise, prepare, print and distribute books, maps, charts, plans and pamphlets which in its
9 judgment it deems necessary for its work. It shall keep an [~~index~~] **inventory** of all open space and
10 natural, aesthetic or ecological areas, **including habitat strongholds as defined in RSA 207:1,**
11 **XIII-a and wildlife corridors as defined in RSA 207:1, XXXVI**, within the city or town, as the
12 case may be, with the plan of obtaining information pertinent to proper utilization of such areas,
13 including lands owned by the state or lands owned by a town or city. **The inventory of habitat**
14 **strongholds and wildlife corridors is intended for informational purposes for regional**
15 **planning commissions and shall not be utilized as the basis for municipal zoning or**
16 **planning purposes.** It shall keep an [~~index~~] **inventory** of all marshlands, swamps and all other
17 wet lands in a like manner, and may recommend to the city council or selectmen or to the
18 department of natural and cultural resources a program for the protection, development or better
19 utilization of all such areas. It shall keep accurate records of its meetings and actions and shall file
20 an annual report which shall be printed in the annual town or municipal report. The commission
21 may appoint such clerks and other employees or subcommittees as it may from time to time require.

22 2 Purposes; Habitat Strongholds and Wildlife Corridors Included. Amend RSA 36:45 to read as
23 follows:

24 36:45 Purposes. The purpose of this subdivision shall be to enable municipalities and counties
25 to join in the formation of regional planning commissions whose duty it shall be to prepare a
26 coordinated plan for the development of a region, taking into account present and future needs with
27 a view toward encouraging the most appropriate use of land, such as for agriculture, forestry,
28 industry, commerce, and housing; the facilitation of transportation and communication, **including**
29 **habitat strongholds as defined in RSA 207:1, XIII-a and wildlife corridors as defined in**

1 *RSA 207:1, XXXVI*; the proper and economic location of public utilities and services; the
 2 development of adequate recreational areas; the promotion of good civic design; and the wise,
 3 efficient expenditure of public funds. The aforesaid plan shall be made in order to promote the
 4 health, safety, morals and general welfare of the region and its inhabitants. To promote these
 5 purposes the office of planning and development shall delineate planning regions for the state so
 6 that each municipality of the state will fall within a delineated region and shall have the opportunity
 7 of forming or joining the regional planning commission for that planning region. In determining
 8 these regions the office shall consider such factors as community of interest and homogeneity,
 9 existing metropolitan and regional planning agencies, patterns of communication and
 10 transportation, geographic features and natural boundaries, extent of urban development, relevancy
 11 of the region for provision of governmental services and functions and its use for administering state
 12 and federal programs, the existence of physical, social and economic problems of a regional
 13 character, and other related characteristics. To accommodate changing conditions, the office may
 14 adjust the boundaries of the planning regions, after consultation with the respective regional
 15 planning commissions.

16 3 Regional Planning Commission; Powers and Duties; Habitat Strongholds and Wildlife
 17 Corridors Included. Amend RSA 36:47, I to read as follows:

18 I. A regional planning commission's powers shall be advisory, and shall generally pertain to
 19 the development of the region within its jurisdiction as a whole. Nothing in this subdivision shall be
 20 deemed to reduce or limit any of the powers, duties or obligations of planning boards in individual
 21 municipalities. The area of jurisdiction of a regional planning commission shall include the areas of
 22 the respective municipalities within the delineated planning region. It shall be the duty of a
 23 regional planning commission to prepare a comprehensive master plan for the development of the
 24 region within its jurisdiction, including the commission's recommendations, among other things, for
 25 the use of land within the region; for the general location, extent, type of use, and character of
 26 highways, major streets, intersections, parking lots, railroads, aircraft landing areas, waterways and
 27 bridges, and other means of transportation, communication, and other purposes; ***including a***
 28 ***consideration of habitat strongholds as defined in RSA 207:1, XIII-a and wildlife corridors***
 29 ***as defined in RSA 207:1, XXXVI***; for the development, extent, and general location of parks,
 30 playgrounds, shore front developments, parkways, and other public reservations and recreation
 31 areas; for the location, type, and character of public buildings, schools, community centers, and other
 32 public property; and for the improvement, redevelopment, rehabilitation, or conservation of
 33 residential, business, industrial and other areas; including the development of programs for the
 34 modernization and coordination of buildings, housing, zoning and subdivision regulations of
 35 municipalities and their enforcement on a coordinated and unified basis. A regional planning
 36 commission may authorize its employees or consultants to render assistance on local planning
 37 problems to any municipality or county which is not a member of said regional planning commission.

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1 The cost of such assistance shall be paid entirely by the municipality or county to which the service
2 is rendered or partly by said municipality or county and partly by any gift, grant, or contribution
3 which may be available for such work or by combination thereof. Said commission shall keep a strict
4 account of the cost of such assistance and shall provide such municipality or county with an itemized
5 statement.

6 4 New Paragraph; Executive Director Fish and Game Commission; Consultations Regarding
7 Habitat Strongholds and Wildlife Corridors. Amend RSA 206:10 by inserting after paragraph IV the
8 following new paragraph:

9 V. The executive director of the fish and game commission may consult with regional
10 planning commissions, conservation commissions, and the department of transportation concerning
11 habitat strongholds as defined in RSA 207:1, XIII-a and wildlife corridors as defined in RSA 207:1,
12 XXXVI.

13 5 New Section; Department of Environmental Services. Amend RSA 21-O by inserting after
14 section 14 the following new sections:

15 21-O:14-a Winnepesaukee River Basin Program; Position Established.

16 I. There is established in the office of the commissioner the unclassified position of director
17 of the Winnepesaukee River Basin Program (WRBP). The director shall be qualified to hold the
18 position by reason of education and experience, and shall perform such duties as the commissioner
19 from time to time may authorize. The director shall be responsible for the operations and
20 maintenance of the WRPB as well as the execution of all programs and projects.

21 II. The commissioner shall nominate, for appointment by the governor, with the consent of
22 the executive council, the unclassified director of the WRPB, who shall serve for a term of 4 years.

23 III. The salary of the director of the WRPB shall be as specified in RSA 94:1-a.

24 IV. Funding shall be transferred into a new expenditure class number 11 within accounting
25 unit 03-44-44-442010-1300.

26 21-O:14-b Winnepesaukee River Basin Program Commission.

27 I. There is established a commission to study transferring ownership and/or operation of the
28 Winnepesaukee River Basin program (WRBP) to an alternative authority which supports the
29 municipalities served by the WRBP.

30 II. The members of the commission shall be as follows:

31 (a) One members of the senate, appointed by the president of the senate.

32 (b) Three members of the house of representatives, appointed by the speaker of the
33 house of representatives.

34 (c) The commissioner of the department of environmental services, or designee.

35 (d) One member of the public, appointed by the Winnepesaukee River Basin program
36 advisory committee.

37 (e) One member of the public, appointed by the mayor of Laconia.

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1 III. Legislative members of the commission shall receive mileage at the legislative rate when
2 attending to the duties of the commission.

3 IV. The commission shall:

4 (a) Identify all of the state-owned physical assets that are necessary for the operation of
5 the Winnepesaukee River Basin program (WRBP).

6 (b) Evaluate whether the WRBP should continue to be owned and operated by the state
7 or whether ownership and/or operational control should be transferred to an alternative authority.

8 (c) Determine if ownership of the WRBP were to be transferred to such an authority,
9 how should the value of the assets being transferred be determined.

10 (d) Identify what statutory provisions would need to be amended in order to transfer
11 ownership and/or operational control of the WRBP.

12 (e) Receive input from the department of environmental services, the Winnepesaukee
13 River Basin program advisory board, and the municipalities served by the WRBP.

14 (f) Identify any other issues that may need to be addressed in order to transfer
15 ownership and/or operational control of the WRBP to an alternative authority. Issues may include
16 but not be limited to legal requirements to create a separate regional authority and governance
17 structure; service and intermunicipal agreements; workforce considerations; organizational
18 requirements for finance, administration and engineering; means for sustainable operations and
19 maintenance; mechanisms for capital projects and bonding/financing future infrastructure costs;
20 organizational structure shortfalls; transfer of federal permit authorities; asset transfer costs and
21 requirements; transfer of legacy financial obligations; and conceptual transition sequence and
22 timeline.

23 V. The members of the study commission shall elect a chairperson from among the
24 members. The first meeting of the commission shall be called by the first-named house member.
25 The first meeting of the commission shall be held within 45 days of the effective date of this section.
26 Three members of the commission shall constitute a quorum.

27 VI. The commission shall report its findings and any recommendations for proposed
28 legislation to the president of the senate, the speaker of the house of representatives, the senate
29 clerk, the house clerk, the governor, and the state library on or before November 1, 2026.

30 6 Compensation of Certain State Offices; Salaries Established; Position Added. Amend RSA
31 94:1-a, I(b) by inserting the following:

32 JJ Department of environmental services director of Winnepesaukee River Basin Program

33 7 Effective Date.

34 I. Sections 5 and 6 of this act shall take effect upon passage.

35 II. This remainder of this act shall take effect 60 days after its passage.

SB 592- FISCAL NOTE

AS AMENDED BY THE SENATE (AMENDMENT # 2026-0516s)

AN ACT enabling regional, conservation, and energy resource planning for habitat strongholds and wildlife corridors and creating a commission to study transferring ownership of the Winnepesaukee River Basin program to an alternative authority.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Estimated State Impact				
	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
Revenue	\$0	\$176,000	\$182,000	\$192,000
<i>Revenue Fund(s)</i>	Winnepesaukee River Basin Program Fund			
Expenditures*	\$0	\$176,000	\$182,000	\$192,000
<i>Funding Source(s)</i>	Winnepesaukee River Basin Program Fund			
Appropriations*	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
<i>Funding Source(s)</i>	None			

*Expenditure = Cost of bill

*Appropriation = Authorized funding to cover cost of bill

Estimated Political Subdivision Impact				
	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029
County Revenue	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
County Expenditures	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Local Revenue	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Local Expenditures	\$0	\$176,000	\$182,000	\$192,000

METHODOLOGY:

This bill enabling regional, conservation, and energy resource planning for habitat strongholds and wildlife corridors and creating a commission to study transferring ownership of the Winnepesaukee River Basin program to an alternative authority, which has no fiscal impact. Section 5 of this bill establishes an unclassified Director of the Winnepesaukee River Basin Program with the Department of Environmental Services.

The Department states the Winnepesaukee River Basin Program is responsible for collecting and treating wastewater for 10 municipalities. The newly authorized unclassified Director position would be part of the Department of Environmental Services and is assumed to be grade JJ, step 1. Estimated salary and benefits for the position are \$176,000 in FY 2027, \$182,000 in FY 2028, and \$192,000 in FY 2029, which would increase the Department's operating budget by those

amounts. The Department further states the municipalities participating in the Winnepesaukee River Basin Program reimburse the Department quarterly for program costs; therefore, while the Department's budget would increase, the net cost to the State would be \$0 due to reimbursement payments from the municipalities. Municipal expenditures would increase by the amounts necessary to reimburse the Department for the cost of this position.

AGENCIES CONTACTED:

Department of Environmental Services