



**For the Environment Committee
Testimony of Alicea Charamut, Executive Director
March 4, 2026**

Rivers Alliance was formed to fight for sound water policies at the state and federal levels, to provide education on water resources, and to advocate for any person or group striving to protect water. If you want clean, free-flowing and healthy rivers, and high-quality drinking water, Rivers Alliance is here to help.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the following raised bill before you today.

SB 313 AN ACT CONCERNING WAKESURFING ON CERTAIN LAKES IN THE STATE – Opposes

We appreciate the Committee's effort to address wake surfing. Wake boat operation raises legitimate and well-documented environmental, safety, and user-conflict concerns. However, the bill's proposed standard requiring operation not less than 200 feet from shore is insufficient to protect Connecticut's lakes and does not reflect the scientific and physical realities of wake-surf operation.

It is clear that legislators are trying to find a balanced path forward. We believe that balance is possible but it requires standards that reflect the ecological realities of Connecticut's waters.

What Is Wake Surfing?

Wake boats operating in wake-surf mode are specifically engineered to create amplified waves. Through ballast tanks and wake-shaping devices, they generate waves that are larger, longer, and more forceful than traditional ski boat wakes. These vessels are designed to maximize wave height and energy.

When those waves are repeatedly generated in relatively small or shallow waterbodies, which describes many Connecticut lakes, the impacts extend beyond user conflict. They directly affect water quality and lake and river health.

What Are the Environmental Impacts?

The waves created during wake surfing are significantly greater in height and energy than typical boating wakes. When operated in shallow or confined waters, they can cause measurable shoreline erosion, sediment resuspension, and damage to aquatic vegetation and habitat.

These impacts are not hypothetical. They have been documented by independent researchers in multiple states¹. Disturbance of bottom sediments can release legacy phosphorus stored in lake and riverbeds, contributing to nutrient loading and fueling harmful algal blooms. Shoreline erosion increases turbidity and degrades habitat for fish and wildlife. Repeated wave energy in narrow or developed lakes compounds these effects over time.

Watershed-based management plans often cost tens of thousands of dollars to prepare and require significant local capacity to implement. Millions of federal, state, and local dollars have been invested in improving water quality through restoration projects, stormwater retrofits, aquatic vegetation management, dredging, and watershed planning and implementation. Lake and watershed associations spend years leveraging limited resources to partner with DEEP in meeting water quality goals.

If we set standards that do not protect against the documented impairments that wake surfing can exacerbate, we risk undermining the progress achieved through local efforts and taxpayer-funded environmental programs designed to ensure our waters remain fishable and swimmable for all residents.

These investments are long-term and costly. We should ensure that inadequate standards do not erode that progress.

Aquatic Invasive Species

The spread of aquatic invasive species is an additional and serious concern. Wake boats use internal ballast systems that are difficult to clean, impossible to fully drain, and, as a practical

¹ [A Field Study of Recreational Powerboat Hydrodynamics and their Impacts on the Water Column and Lakebed](#)

[North Lake Study](#)

matter, cannot be thoroughly inspected. That creates a heightened risk of transporting invasive species between waterbodies.

Connecticut already struggles with aquatic invasives, including the Connecticut River strain of hydrilla, which poses significant ecological and economic threats. Lake associations rely heavily on limited grants funded by the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) boat stamp program and other constrained funding sources to manage these threats. These grants cannot cover the escalating costs of hydrilla response, and state support for rapid response remains limited.

Policies that increase the risk of spreading invasive species must be evaluated in the context of these capacity constraints.

Why 200 Feet Is Not Enough for Connecticut

The key policy question is not: “What distance do other states use?” It is: “Do Connecticut’s lakes have the size, depth, and open-water capacity to absorb wake-surfing activity under those standards?”

Standards that may be workable on large, sparsely developed lakes do not translate to smaller, more densely developed lakes like we have here in Connecticut.

Importing standards from other states without examining waterbody comparability creates a policy mismatch that will further exacerbate growing water quality concerns and undermine millions of dollars in resources invested in addressing water quality.

States in the Upper Midwest often cited in this discussion have far larger lakes. Many of these states’ lakes are thousands of acres, miles across, with expansive open-water basins. Yet even in those systems, municipalities have adopted additional safeguards due to shoreline erosion and user conflict. Connecticut’s lakes are generally smaller, more densely developed, and more spatially constrained. If wake surfing requires active management on large lakes with significant room to absorb wave energy, we should recognize that the margin for error on our lakes is considerably smaller.

Distance Alone Is Not the Only Standard

It is also important to recognize that if standards designed to protect our waters are to be put in place we cannot rely solely on shoreline setbacks.

Water depth is a critical factor in minimizing environmental impacts. Operating a wake boat in insufficient depth increases the likelihood of sediment disturbance, which can release phosphorus and degrade water clarity.

For example, Vermont’s wake boat law does not rely on a shoreline setback alone. Vermont requires wake boats operating in wake-surf mode to remain at least 500 feet from shore *and* operate in water at least 20 feet deep. Vermont also requires a 200-foot-wide operating corridor. These provisions reflect an understanding that depth and operating area all matter in protecting water quality and shoreline stability.

The DEEP Wake Boat & Wakesurf Study

The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection is currently conducting a Wake Boat & Wakesurf Study. That study is specifically designed to evaluate the environmental, recreational, navigational, economic, and public health factors associated with wake boat operation in Connecticut waters. A draft report is expected, followed by a final report later this year.

The legislature should allow that process to conclude before establishing statewide minimum standards. The study was initiated precisely because this issue requires a Connecticut-specific evaluation. The hope is that it will provide data, analysis, and recommendations tailored to the size, depth, and use patterns of our waters.

Setting a statutory minimum before the study is completed risks preempting its findings and undermining the purpose of that effort. If the state commissioned a comprehensive review, it is prudent to consider its conclusions before codifying a baseline standard.

Include Rivers

We also encourage the Committee to consider rivers. Certain stretches of the Connecticut and Housatonic Rivers are wide and slow-moving enough to attract wake boat use. Riverbanks are often highly susceptible to erosion, and sediment resuspension in river systems can degrade water quality and aquatic habitat just as it does in lakes and ponds.

Preservation of Local Control and DEEP’s Authority

We encourage the committee to ensure that this language does not subvert the preservation of local control under Conn. Gen. Stat. § 15-136. Under this statute, municipalities may adopt boating ordinances subject to DEEP review and approval. That structure allows for site-specific solutions while maintaining statewide consistency and oversight. It is a thoughtful framework that should be preserved.

Minimum Standards and Local Control Are Complementary

Local control and statewide minimum standards are not mutually exclusive. They operate at different levels of responsibility.

Local control allows decisions to be tailored to site-specific conditions. Minimum standards safeguard shared public resources when there is documented risk of harm. When an activity carries measurable risks to water quality, the state has an obligation to establish a protective baseline. That baseline ensures that no waterbody is exposed to a level of activity that science indicates can cause degradation.

Without minimum standards, protection becomes uneven and reactive. Some communities may act; others may lack the resources or technical capacity to evaluate impacts until damage has already occurred. Water quality degradation is often slow, cumulative, and expensive to reverse. A statewide floor can prevent preventable harm before it occurs.

Local control then operates above that floor. Municipalities may adopt stricter measures, account for lake morphology, or prohibit the activity if conditions warrant. These are complementary tools for responsibly managing a shared and vulnerable resource.

Unnecessary Ambiguity

Finally, we ask the Committee to clarify the language “negate or preempt any prohibition on the use of wake boats on any lake that borders the towns of Warren, Washington and Kent” in this bill. This language appears to preserve the ordinance passed for Lake Waramaug. However, naming one specific lake raises questions about other current or future prohibitions. This sentence introduces unnecessary ambiguity.

Conclusion

We believe Connecticut can get this right. We can establish standards that protect water quality, respect recreational use, preserve DEEP’s authority, and maintain local flexibility. But to be effective, the policy must reflect the science and the physical realities of our lakes and rivers. Size, depth, shoreline configuration, and ecological sensitivity must be taken into account — and the forthcoming DEEP study should inform any statewide baseline.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on this important issue.