

February 26, 2024

Senator Jane Kitchel  
Senate Committee on Appropriations

Dear Chairwoman Kitchel,

During testimony from Commissioner Chris Herrick of the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife (VT F&W) before your committee, he laid out plans to balance his department's FY2025 budget with a 100% funding cut of Lake Champlain International (LCI). I would like to give a bit more context as to what this \$30,000 funding supports, and the potential negative and widespread impacts its cut would produce. LCI is the organizer of the LCI Father's Day Derby, which will be celebrating its 43rd anniversary this year. Our event provides myriad economic, scientific, and educational benefits to the state.

**Economic Impact:** In 2023 the derby drew over 5,000 anglers from 30+ states to Lake Champlain. Approximately 40% were from outside Vermont. This creates an economic boon to hundreds of small businesses - fishing licenses, lodging, food, fuel, boat rentals, bait, and fishing gear. The derby operates weigh stations the entire span of the lake -- from the Canadian border to South Bay -- and these benefits are distributed widely through dozens of rural communities.

The owner of The Bay Store in St. Albans stated, "the LCI Derby weekend is by far our largest volume weekend for the year. Bringing more customers to our business is what the LCI does ... weekends like this weekend are vital to our business." The manager of multiple Ace Hardware locations acknowledges our value as well: "We thank LCI ... as it definitely helps to drive customers into our locations."

**Creel Data:** The derby provides data to state fisheries biologists that is used to inform management decisions and practices. Our detailed statistics of nearly 2,000 fish give an invaluable snapshot of relative and absolute fish distributions, growth trends, and overall fisheries health. It is unknown if department biologists would have the resources to replicate this effort. While there are many other tournaments hosted on the lake, the majority target bass, excluding many anglers. The derby includes 11 eligible species and has made efforts the past few years to appeal to more warm water anglers, specifically bowfin and catfish.

The derby has also assisted with sample collection for numerous studies, including those conducted by Dartmouth College, Harvard University, and the US Department of Fish & Wildlife.

**Outreach:** We provide several channels for interaction with anglers. Our printed derby guide, with 10,000 copies distributed annually, includes educational pieces submitted by VT F&W biologists. Recent topics have included walleye restoration efforts and newly identified invasive threats.

Several of our weigh stations are staffed by biologists, who find the anecdotal information they receive from anglers to be valuable in their respective fields of study.

Based on Commissioner Herrick's testimony, the derby is the single marketing initiative being cut. We certainly understand financial constraints and limited budgets but feel strongly that we provide a service whose benefits to your constituents are orders of magnitude greater than the funds we receive from the state. We respectfully request that legislators explore what VT F&W programs are remaining fully funded, and whether the derby should be singled out to bear the brunt.

I appreciate your consideration and would be happy to answer any questions you and/or your fellow committee members may have.

Respectfully submitted,



Elizabeth Ehlers, Director

CC: Hannah Gottschalk, Staff Associate