Housatonic River Commission

"to coordinate on a regional basis the local management and protection of the Housatonic River Valley in northwestern Connecticut"

Minutes of the August 11, 2026 Meeting
(*subject to approval at the next meeting*)

HRC Office, West Cornwall, and via Google Meet

Christian Allyn—North Canaan—A
Jack Anstine—North Canaan—A
Colter Rule—Canaan (Falls Village)—P
Mark Gozonsky—Canaan (Falls Village)—P
Robin Sweeney—Salisbury—A
TBD - Salisbury—
Jim Saunders, Secretary—Sharon—P
William R. Tingley, Vice-chair—Sharon—P
Phil Hart—Cornwall—A
Bruce Bennett—Cornwall—P
Jesse Klingebiel, Chair—Kent—P
Michael Benjamin—Kent—A
Marc Andreotto, Treasurer—New Milford—P
Robert Gambino—New Milford—P

Also present: Julie Saxton, HRC W&S Program Coordinator; Jackie Dias, NPS; Sarah Better, NHCOG; Drew Ransom, CT DEEP; and one member of the press.

Mr. Tingley called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

The July 14, 2026, Meeting Minutes were approved as written.

The July 23, 2026, Special Meeting Minutes were approved as written.

Financial Reports

Mr. Andreotto reported a total available Wild & Scenic funds balance of $130,073.15. The local account balance is $12,921.97.

Mr. Saunders moved that the following three invoices totaling $3,957.50 be paid for the Invoice Period 7/1/2026–7/31/2026:

7/31	**Organizational Development**	**396**	**Susan's July Hours**	**Susan Francisco**	**$307.50**
7/31	**Organizational Development**		**Julie August Invoice**	**Julie Saxton**	**$3,500.00**
8/11	**Organizational Development**	**07302026**	**Drone demonstration**	**Beyond All Drones LLC**	**$150.00**

***The motion was seconded and passed unanimously*.**

The Department of the Interior (DOI) has officially approved the commission's budget for the next fiscal year (FY 2026–27). Starting in October, the commission will have access to $220,000, already allocated per the work plan approved earlier in the year (February/March). Expenses approved prior to the start of the new fiscal year may be drawn against the current year's funds.

No grant appropriations have yet been made for the new fiscal year, which begins in October. Of the $220,000, NHCOG will receive a de minimis amount of $20,000 next year.

The Treasurer was thanked for the growing scope of his role in managing commission finances.

Zoning Communications

HRC's role in the zoning review process was discussed.

HRC currently functions in an advisory capacity to local zoning boards; federal Wild & Scenic recognition has increased the weight given to HRC input.

Zoning permit applicants are technically required to notify the river commission when applying for a permit near the river but are not required to present to HRC directly. There was discussion about formalizing/tightening this process.

The idea of instituting regular river/wetlands inspections was raised, citing Sharon's wetlands commission monthly inspection model; suggested for further discussion at a steering committee meeting.

Reference was made to a prior list of review questions for commissioners (previously developed by Maddy Scherff) that should be reissued/highlighted as a tool for reviewing zoning applications.

A zoning application has been filed for 46 Bridge Street, Kent, near the Kent School boat docks: a landowner brought in heavy equipment on a steep hillside after letting the property overgrow for several years, prompting the town's inland wetlands enforcement officer to issue a cease-and-desist. HRC has no official jurisdiction but is monitoring the matter and expects the town's inland wetlands commission to pursue appropriate next steps.

Commissioners were reminded to stay alert to zoning activity in their towns and to maintain rapport with local zoning commissions.

Communications and Outreach

Website Updates: Ms. Saxton shared a mockup of a proposed homepage update, including a rotating homepage image, events, and a new links bar. Discussion centered on displaying USGS river flow data on the homepage. The preference is to show the current/immediate flow reading directly on the homepage rather than only linking to USGS, although that is not well suited for embedding.

Preference was expressed for CFS (cubic feet per second) readings at Bull's Bridge, Falls Village, and Gaylordsville. Ms. Saxton agreed to develop a mockup for the next meeting, and to look into whether a live-updating widget/feed is feasible.

Fall Open House Event: Planning is underway for an informal educational open house on Saturday, October 3, 12:00–3:00 PM at Housatonic Meadows State Park.

- Format: drop-in / come-and-go, not a formal presentation — an opportunity for the public to meet HRC representatives, learn about the Wild & Scenic designation, and ask questions about zoning and grants.
- Logistics: set up tables by town; each town commissioner asked to invite their first selectman and relevant town officials.
- Food: no money may be exchanged on state land per park regulations; a food truck must be paid for directly by HRC. A quote of approximately $3,000 was received for a food truck serving roughly 75 people.
- Possible additional participants: NPS, CT DEEP, and HVA.

Resource Protection

Mr. Bennett reported on efforts to use drone imagery to map invasive plants along the river; the approach proved limited in practice, as lighting conditions made plant identification difficult.

A prior outreach effort to find a contractor to manage invasives received no response.

Invasives (e.g., knotweed, water chestnut, bittersweet) are a watershed-wide, multi-state issue — noting severe knotweed infestation upstream near the Sheffield, MA covered bridge. HRC's efforts may be most effective if focused on cross-state (CT/MA) coordination.

Aquatic Vegetation Survey: A canoe survey above the Canaan Dam had raised concern about a dense weed bed, prompting further investigation. A follow-up survey did not find hydrilla north of the dam — native Elodea, coontail (invasive but less aggressive), and a pondweed species were found instead. Considered good news. Contact was made with the Twin Lakes Association and Northeast Aquatics Research (their invasive species research contact), who indicated that there is no known hydrilla in the watershed at this time.

Road Salt / Winter Maintenance Chemicals: Mr. Bennett raised concerns about an observed decline in mayfly hatches, anecdotally linked by local fishing guides to changes in road salt/de-icing chemical practices, including the use of magnesium-based compounds at lower temperatures. He referenced a 2013/2014 Cary Institute study on road salt impacts, and a past symposium for town road managers on reducing chemical usage (e.g., pre-application of brine) that reportedly saved towns money.

HRC could consider reviving/reissuing this study and giving information to town road crews before winter. It was suggested the resource protection committee refine the messaging (e.g., citing specific comparative data) before formally presenting a recommendation to the towns and road crews.

River Use and Access

Ruggles Landing - No update; the site remains overgrown and “on hold.” Plans are to follow up directly with First Selectman Jesse Bunce regarding the status of a possible town vote.

FirstLight

Ongoing monitoring of the river access point in Salisbury (across from the Falls Village generator) continues to show the presence of invasives (mugwort, oriental bittersweet) as well as plant diversity (American groundnut, silky dogwood, wild bergamot, American bittersweet).

FirstLight / National Park Service Site Visit: Ms. Dias said that a site visit is scheduled for the next day with National Park Service Hydropower Assistance Program staff (who review FERC hydropower licensing on behalf of NPS). Itinerary: Falls Village power plant (10:00 AM), the Canaan Dam, and Bull's Bridge.

Discussion focused on the Bull's Bridge portage issue: Given that the area contains unrunnable Class IV–V rapids, FirstLight's officially filed recreation plan lists a two-mile portage along Route 7 around the dam, which is considered unreasonable. A previous dam owner reportedly offered truck-assisted portages around the dam; it's worth investigating whether FirstLight could reinstate a similar service.

North Kent Road

North Kent Road access will remain closed through Labor Day, per state input that the wildlife management area must remain open for hunting/fishing access after Labor Day.

Julia Rogers (HVA) looked into portable toilet options (a vendor confirmed feasibility despite poor road conditions); dumpster service options were less certain. A stated goal is to develop a plan for fall/winter to revise the access setup for next year, given significant overcrowding/partying issues reported at the site (up to approximately 30 cars and 100 people).

Concern was raised that unmanaged conditions at North Kent Road could set a troubling precedent for planning at Helco Field and Ruggles Landing.

Ms. Dias shared observations from a visit to the Upper Delaware Wild & Scenic River (PA/NY), where similar overcrowding/litter issues occur, noting their approach of stationing small seasonal NPS/ park-ranger kiosks at access points during peak season as a possible model.

It was suggested that this kind of access-management infrastructure (kiosks, staffing, partnerships) could become a significant, fundable HRC initiative across multiple access points (Helco Field, Ruggles Landing, Bull's Bridge/Gunn's Eddie, North Kent Road)—potentially framed as a 2027 vision, with HVA as an active partner.

Member Updates

Towns

Salisbury - Josh Tavlin, a resident and naturalist, has informed the selectmen of his interest in filling the vacant commissioner position.

Cornwall - Continued monitoring of railroad vegetation spraying practices; no herbicide spraying was observed this year, considered a success following the previously past spraying restriction regulation. The railroad remains unresponsive to direct HRC outreach, including refusing to attend meetings with the state where HRC is involved, despite HRC having proactively developed wetland/setback maps for their use.

Sharon - A River Road erosion issue south of the metal bridge was discussed, in which a landowner is pushing for a riprap repair that is unacceptable to NPS/HRC. The first selectman, the town road crew, and Cardinal Engineering are instead working to negotiate a two-lane road-repair solution and a driveway-permit arrangement with the landowner. A one-lane road with a traffic signal was discussed as a possible lower-impact alternative but raises logistical concerns (line of sight on a curve, approximately 12 homeowners affected beyond that point, easement/staging constraints).

A zoning application has been filed to repair a garage at 320 Route 7, which was damaged when a truck backed into it several weeks ago; the repair is within the same footprint and is considered straightforward.

New Milford - A previously discussed invasive-species removal grant to the town has been postponed indefinitely due to an incomplete project plan.

Partners

NPS - Received a project review request from the Army Corps of Engineers for a culvert replacement on Kirk Road, Sharon — considered straightforward, review due Friday. A site visit with an NPS hydrogeomorphologist is planned for Wednesday, September 2, to review river dynamics, flow, and infrastructure influences; open to any commissioners interested in joining.

HVA - (via Mr. Klingebiel from Julia Rogers): A call with Tim Abbott, HVA, acknowledged that quarterly progress reporting on their grant-funded contracts has not been happening as intended and HVA is committed to resuming regular, brief updates (rather than infrequent lengthy reports), starting with the October meeting.

CT DEEP - Mr. Ransom reported that an ongoing angler/creel survey is in progress and expected to continue for a few more months. Fewer anglers were observed than typical, possibly linked to high/inconsistent flows this season. Local fishing guides report stable trout numbers but a decline in bass populations; efforts to assess the cause (flow variability, temperature, angling pressure, disease, catch-and-release rates) remain inconclusive. Ecosystem notes: crayfish are now present (beneficial as a food source but also prey on eggs); carp appear to have declined sharply, possibly due to targeted fishing.

Mutual Concerns and Future Agenda Items

Mr. Klingebiel proposed suspending subcommittee meetings for the remainder of August. All agreed.

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Gambino. The motion was seconded, approved unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

Recording Secretary,
Susan Francisco

CCC – Citizens Coordinating Council
CCT – Cornwall Conservation Trust
DEEP – Department of Energy and Environmental Protection
DOT – Department of Transportation
EnCon – Connecticut Environmental Conservation Police
EPA – Environmental Protection Agency
FERC - Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
GE – General Electric
HMSP – Housatonic Meadows State Park
HRC – Housatonic River Commission
HVA – Housatonic Valley Association
HVRHS – Housatonic Valley Regional High School
JKW – Japanese Knotweed
NCD – Northwest Conservation District
NHCOG – Northwest Hills Council of Governments
NPS – National Park Service
RIO - River Information and Outreach
TU – Trout Unlimited
ZEO - Zoning Enforcement Officer

Next regular meeting – September 8, 2026