

March 8, 2026

Senator Kevin Avar
Chair, Energy and Natural Resources Committee
New Hampshire Senate

Subject: Opposition to HB 1603

Dear Chair Avar and Members of the Committee,

We appreciate the opportunity to submit this letter regarding HB 1603. We write today to respectfully urge you **not** to advance this bill in its current form, as it would significantly weaken New Hampshire's ability to conserve its threatened and endangered wildlife.

We are Dallas Huggins and Drew Stevens, founders of New Hampshire Turtle Rescue, a nonprofit public charity dedicated to the rehabilitation and conservation of wild native turtles. We are the only two wildlife rehabilitators in New Hampshire permitted to care for threatened and endangered turtle species. Last year alone, our clinic admitted **over 400 wild turtles**, more than **20%** of which were state-listed species. We witness daily the consequences of inadequate planning, fragmented protections, and data gaps on vulnerable wildlife populations.

New Hampshire is home to seven native turtle species. The majority are at risk of extinction. Species such as the Blanding's turtle, which can live more than **75 years in the wild**, are especially vulnerable; the loss of even a single breeding adult every five years can lead to that local population going extinct. These species depend on accurate, scientifically sound data so that their habitats can be properly considered during development review.

Unfortunately, **HB 1603 would severely undermine the fundamental data systems required to protect these species**. Although the bill appears simply to require landowner permission before observations can be used by the state, its practical effect is far more consequential.

Today, ecological reviews through the Department of Environmental Services occur only when projects require a wetlands or alteration-of-terrain permit and the DataCheck Tool identifies the presence of protected species. That tool relies entirely on a database of wildlife records. If HB 1603 prevents accurate records from entering this database or purges valid historical data because the original landowner permission was verbal, implied, or not formally documented at the time, New Hampshire will lose decades of irreplaceable scientific information. The result would be large, dangerous gaps in our ability to evaluate development impacts on rare species.

It is also important to clarify a widespread misconception: **New Hampshire Fish & Game does not have authority to impose land-use restrictions on private property**. The agency's role is limited to providing **non-binding recommendations** to minimize harm to protected wildlife.

Concerns that species observations lead to automatic land-use restrictions by any state agency are unfounded.

Threatened and endangered wildlife are a **public resource**, not the property of a landowner simply because they occur on privately owned land. Observations of these species—including those made responsibly by the public—are also part of that public trust. HB 1603’s requirement to “*ensure landowner permission*” would give private landowners unilateral power over a public resource and restrict the flow of critical scientific data.

This bill also raises numerous practical and legal ambiguities:

- If a state-listed species is observed on a roadside or crossing the road (a common occurrence with turtles), would permission be required from the town or DOT before reporting it?
- When land changes hands, would existing records be invalidated automatically?
- Could new landowners demand that long-standing, scientifically valid observations be removed?

The uncertainty created by these questions threatens not only wildlife, but also landowners themselves. Many federal and state funding programs (e.g., USDA Forest Stewardship Plans, Conservation Stewardship Plans, Wetland Reserve Easements, and the NH Fish & Game Small Grants Program) use species records to prioritize projects. Without an accurate database, **many landowners may become less eligible** for the very programs that help them steward their land, manage forests, and create habitat.

At a time when New Hampshire’s threatened and endangered species already lack sufficient protection, HB 1603 would dismantle some of the few mechanisms we have to limit harm and guide responsible development decisions. It would discard valid scientific data, restrict the reporting of wildlife observations, and create new barriers for both conservationists and landowners.

For these reasons, and with great respect, we strongly urge you **not to pass HB 1603 in its current form.**

Thank you for your consideration, your service, and your attention to this matter of ecological and public importance.

Sincerely,

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Licensed New Hampshire Wildlife Rehabilitators
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