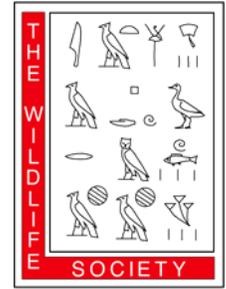


April 19, 2016

Matthew A. Beaton, Secretary
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
100 Cambridge Street
Boston, MA 02114



Dear Secretary Beaton:

On behalf of the New England Chapter of the Wildlife Society, we are writing in support of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife's (MassWildlife) initiative to introduce the endangered timber rattlesnake to Mount Zion Island, located within the Quabbin Reservoir. The Wildlife Society is an international, non-profit organization with a mission to, "*inspire, empower, and enable wildlife professionals to sustain wildlife populations and habitats through science-based management and conservation.*" The New England Chapter of the Wildlife Society is comprised of several hundred professional wildlife biologists and students with wide ranging experience and careers in academia, state and federal government, non-profit organizations, and private consulting.

The timber rattlesnake is listed as an Endangered Species in Massachusetts, pursuant to MGL 131A due to its dramatically reduced population. Historically found statewide, the species has been relegated to a few isolated populations due to anthropogenic pressures, such as direct habitat loss and fragmentation, removal by collectors, roadkills, and intentional killing by individuals. The remaining populations occur primarily on protected public lands, such as the Blue Hills Reservation. These areas have significant public recreational use, yet rattlesnake encounters with humans are exceedingly rare.

We believe that MassWildlife's plan to introduce a small number (likely less than 10 individuals per year) of timber rattlesnakes to Mount Zion Island, over a few years, is based on sound science with a goal of promoting the long-term survival of this species with essentially no risk to the general public. We recognize that introduction of the timber rattlesnake to Mount Zion Island has garnered some opposition based on fear and the cultural stigma associated with venomous snakes. We also recognize that some aspects of rattlesnake biology as well as some of the details about MassWildlife's proposal have been inaccurately reported by the media and led to greater public opposition than might otherwise have been realized. For example, during their active period, most timber rattlesnakes do not venture further than 2 to 3 miles from their winter hibernation sites. Timber rattlesnakes imprint on their hibernation site and return to the same site each fall. Thus, given the size of Mount Zion Island and isolation within a large waterbody, there would be a low probability of any snake leaving and very little chance that a snake that did leave by swimming to the mainland would survive if it failed to return to the island in time to hibernate.

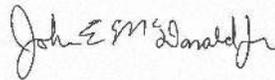
Given the increasingly limited suitable habitat for timber rattlesnakes remaining in the Commonwealth and the continued threat to the fragmented, endangered population of the species posed by direct human-caused mortality, our Chapter believes this limited introduction program is a

scientifically sound course of action. In addition, timber rattlesnakes are now facing a new threat of Snake Fungal Disease, an emerging disease known to reduce health and potentially cause mortality in this species, as well as other snake species. Introduction of captive bred disease free timber rattlesnakes to Mount Zion has the added benefit of keeping a healthy stock of snakes isolated from potential carriers of Snake Fungal Disease on the mainland. We believe MassWildlife, in designating as the introduction site an island with no legal public access, has appropriately balanced the conservation needs of the species with the need to minimize the already negligible risk to the general public. We ask that you support MassWildlife's proposal and use your office to help educate the public and legislators who raise uninformed objections based on fear rather than facts. We are available to provide additional information or answer specific questions on the biology of timber rattlesnakes and the need to establish a population safe from direct exposure to human caused mortality to ensure the future viability of the species in Massachusetts. We sincerely appreciate your consideration in this matter.

Very respectfully,



David Cowell, CWB, PWS
Chapter Representative



John McDonald, Ph.D.
Chapter Representative
Vice-President and Fellow, The Wildlife Society

cc: Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture
Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife