GUN RANGE PLAN BAD IDEA IN QUIET GRISWOLD

Should we add the chronic, erratic, intrusive sound of a gun range to Pachaug State Forest, Connecticut's largest - the sonic booms and gas explosions spraying lead, a proven neurotoxin, into our environment? Why go to the quietest place to make the most noise?

On March 20, the state Department of Administrative Services announced the authorization of $1.1 million to create a 113-acre firearms training range for state police in Griswold. During an epoch when national culture is being gripped by gun violence, state officials want to spend your money to build a gun palace.

Four other agencies already have signed off on this wildlife-tormenting, tranquility-disrupting intrusion of big government into small town life. The list includes the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of Policy and Management, the Property Review Board and the Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection. Correction: Agencies don't sign off on bad ideas - people do. George C. Jepsen, Benjamin Barnes, Edwin S. Greenberg, Dora B. Schriro, from these agencies respectively, and Melody Currey from administrative services signed off. People who would likely vote against a gun range in their own home towns.

People who I hope will change their minds after reading the 2017 bestseller "The Nature Fix," by journalist Florence Williams, subtitled, "Why Nature Makes us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative." Natural places, she writes, are increasingly being valued as "acoustic resources" to achieve the "calm alert" brain state we need to cope with chronic stress, one rich in the alpha waves "prized by Zen masters, surfers and poets." Aggravating environmental noise pollutes that resource just as surely as chemicals and invasive species.

A worse site could not have been chosen from the perspective of transportation and environmental costs. The proposed site in Griswold is in the southeast corner of the state, more than three times farther from Hartford than the present facility in Simsbury. If approved, thousands of officers will be traveling at least three times longer on the state's dime, putting hundreds of thousands of extra miles on state vehicles and burning gasoline, emitting pollution and congesting our roads along the way.

The proposed site also will adversely impact our state's largest remaining patch of public woodland habitat. Pachaug State Forest is twice the size of the nearest contender, Cockaponset in and around Haddam. The proposed site, 100 Lee Road in Griswold, occupies the tip of a narrow peninsula that is almost surrounded by a landscape protected by state law for wildlife conservation and nature-based activities. Legally, the site is outside the state forest. Effectively, it's not.

Of course, the state police need to train with firearms. They've got a facility in Simsbury, one that's worked since the 1940s. Now they claim that it isn't large enough, and that expansion would be precluded by flood-plain regulations. If a larger range is truly needed, then why not use the state National Guard shooting range in East Haven, an idea suggested by U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney? Or why not site one on already blighted land, perhaps a brownfield pre-contaminated with lead? Some dead malls must even be big enough, and being inside would help with sound abatement.

Firearms hunting is allowed in Pachaug State Forest, and it clearly makes noise. But the occasional gunshot and the chronic noise of a gun range are not the same.

Luckily, state law requires that an environmental impact assessment be carried out. During the hearings proposed for May, scientists will have a chance to feature the emerging discipline of sound ecology, which rigorously links changes in animal and human behavior to intrusive noises. For
example, the balance between predator and prey can depend on hearing faint sounds. Some animals avoid chronic human noise by moving away. Some move in because others move out. For humans within those ecosystems, intrusive noises, especially gunfire, can raise stress, compromise health and inhibit learning.

The five agencies named above clearly have much to learn. Perhaps their learning has been inhibited by the intrusive noises of office life, and by the dearth of calming sounds: birds singing, leaves rustling, raindrops dripping, waves lapping and brooks murmuring.