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Testimony of Erin Crotty

Executive Director, Audubon New York

Before the Joint Legislative Hearings on the New York State Budget

January 28, 2016

Chairwoman Young, Chairman Farrell, Chairman O'Mara, Chairman Englebright and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for allowing Audubon the opportunity to offer testimony on Governor Andrew Cuomo's State Fiscal Year 2016-2017 (SFY 2016-17) Executive Budget proposal. My name is Erin Crotty and I am the Executive Director for Audubon New York and Vice President of the National Audubon Society. Audubon New York is a leading program of the National Audubon Society and represents 27 local Chapters and 50,000 members across the state. Our mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity. In other words, Audubon is the voice for birds.

I would like to begin by thanking you and your colleagues for your many efforts and accomplishments in the 2015 legislative session. Audubon is grateful to the Legislature and Governor Cuomo for appropriating \$177 million to the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), enacting the critically important Water Infrastructure Improvement Act and appropriating \$200 million over three fiscal years, providing desperately needed funding to upgrade our State Parks system, and supporting funding for habitat restoration throughout New York. This funding is essential to the protection of habitats for birds and other wildlife.

Audubon New York looks forward to working with the Legislature and the Administration to build on this success in order to create a more sustainable shared environment that benefits birds, wildlife, and people. The Governor's Executive Budget proposal includes an historic investment that will safeguard our environment - from providing clean water and access to clean water, protecting habitat, sparking a renaissance for our parks and public lands, and building a bridge to our future by inspiring and educating the next generation about the importance of a protected environment.

A Sustainable Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)

All across New York, demand and public support for projects that protect water, improve the quality of our air and public health, and protect habitat is dramatically increasing. In robust and challenging economic conditions, the EPF has proven to be a cornerstone of our State's conservation spending, infusing more than \$2 billion for critical environmental infrastructure improvements into the state's economy. Every county has benefited directly from EPF investments which have the additional benefit of stimulating the economy and keeping New Yorkers working while protecting and restoring our natural resources and our communities.

Governor Cuomo's proposed \$300 million EPF appropriation is an unprecedented investment in our environment and Audubon urges **your approval of this appropriation level. Audubon is a member of a broad-based coalition of over 150 groups that has advocated for a \$300 million EPF appropriation level to help meet current demand.** If approved in the final budget, it will make New York a national leader by ensuring the conservation of critical resources for future generations while creating jobs and making our communities more resilient. As in the past, we urge that the EPF appropriation not come at the expense of other critical environmental programs and we are pleased that funding from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative has not been used to reach the \$300 million appropriation level.

\$2 million for Biodiversity/Landowner Habitat Conservation Program in EPF

Audubon advocates for a minimum of \$2 million in incentives for conservation on private lands. The majority of wildlife habitat in New York is privately owned. Actions landowners take have a direct impact on conservation, especially in stewarding our State's forest resources. As identified in the New York State Forest Resource Assessment and Strategy (FRAS), new incentives are needed to incentivize private forest landowners to undertake sustainable forest management activities. Such incentives will help improve the health of our forests, make them more resilient to climate change and other stressors, and provide improved habitat for forest dependent birds and other wildlife.

For the past two fiscal years, the Legislature and Governor have appropriated \$500,000 to **the Biodiversity/Landowner Habitat Conservation Program** to offer grants to private landowners for the implementation of habitat conservation plans. **Audubon is advocating for a \$2 million appropriation for this purpose in this year's budget.**

Currently, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, provides financial and technical assistance to agricultural producers and private forest landowners to advance stewardship of private land. In federal fiscal year 2015, \$861 million in financial assistance was made available through EQIP. Historically demand for this funding consistently exceeds availability which was again the case in FY 2015 when only 23% of all eligible applications to EQIP were funded. Compounding these challenges, in the federal omnibus appropriations bill for federal fiscal year 2016, EQIP funding was reduced by \$321 million.

The EPF's Biodiversity/Landowner Habitat Conservation Program category is a critical source of funding to farmers and private forest owners to voluntarily promote practices that conserve our soil, water, and wildlife habitat. Audubon is proud to work directly with these private landowners and

knows first-hand that this incentive funding is the lynchpin to undertaking these management practices on farms and in forests.

NY Parks 2020

We strongly support the Governor's continued commitment to restore State Parks and historic sites with the launch of the NY Parks 2020 initiative which will invest \$900 million in State Parks by 2020. Audubon fully supports the \$90 million proposed appropriation to the Parks 2020 initiative in this year's budget. The \$1 billion infrastructure needs and critical safety repairs identified by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has received significant support over the last 4 years: a \$380 million investment by the State which has been coupled with \$200 million in other funds, including the EPF. Hundreds of park improvement projects have been completed or are underway in every region of the state due to this commitment by the Legislature and Governor.

Over the last several rounds of NY Works funding, over \$3 million has been dedicated to habitat improvements and natural resource stewardship projects that have augmented and leveraged our *Audubon in the Parks* initiative and advanced important conservation projects. We urge for at least \$3 million to be dedicated this year to similar stewardship projects.

DEC Capital Improvements

Audubon also applauds the proposed \$40 million appropriation to the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to address capital needs. Audubon enthusiastically supports the portion of this funding to be directed to connecting birdwatchers and other outdoor enthusiasts to un-tapped State owned lands. In addition, Audubon is supportive of this funding being used to improve infrastructure and habitat on DEC property and Wildlife Management Areas.

Further Fostering Conservation on Private Lands

As stated, the majority of wildlife habitat in New York is privately owned and actions landowners take have a direct impact on conservation. Audubon has advocated for more funding to incentivize landowners to engage in conservation and to leverage similar federal programs. **In addition, the Legislature should consider advancing tax credit reforms, including Forest Tax Law 480-a.**

Water Infrastructure Improvement Act Funding

Audubon commends the Legislature for the foresight in enacting the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act last year and committing \$200 million over 3 fiscal years to begin to address the need for municipal grants that act as a catalyst for undertaking drinking water and wastewater projects throughout the State. Audubon is very supportive of the Governor's proposed appropriation of an additional \$100 million to this fund – making a minimum of \$250 million available to municipalities for these projects over the next two fiscal years.

Though historic and unprecedented, this funding level is not enough to address the critical problem of our aging wastewater and drinking water systems. **New York is served by some of the nation's oldest wastewater infrastructure, and the State estimates that over \$36 billion is needed for wastewater infrastructure and an additional \$38 billion is needed in drinking water infrastructure to upgrade these facilities and to reduce the water quality impairments they cause.**

Clean water and access to clean water is essential for the survival of birds and people. New York's clean waterways provide the foundation for healthy ecosystems. Not incidentally, investment in clean water will have a huge economic multiplier effect as tourism and economic progress will continue to spring forward.

Audubon looks forward to working with the Legislature with the goal of increasing funding for the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act even further in this year's budget.

Conclusion

Investments in environmental projects are investments in job creation and improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers. We know that the EPF has leveraged \$7 in return for every \$1 invested. We know that for every \$1 billion invested in water infrastructure projects, between 30,000 and 47,500 jobs are created. We look forward to working with you to secure increased funding for environmental protection and natural resource conservation projects throughout our State – it is good for birds, our communities, and our economy.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify today. Should you have any questions, please contact me at ecrotty@audubon.org or 518-869-9731.