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Testimony of Erin Crotty
Executive Director, Audubon New York & Vice President of National Audubon Society
Before the Joint Legislative Hearings on the New York State Budget
February 13, 2017

Chairwoman Young, Chairman Farrell, Chairman O'Mara, Chairman Englebright and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for granting Audubon the opportunity to offer testimony on Governor Andrew Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal for State Fiscal Year 2017-2018. I'm Erin Crotty, the Executive Director of Audubon New York and Vice President of the National Audubon Society. As a leading state program of the National Audubon Society, Audubon New York leads our network of 50,000 members, 27 local Audubon Chapters, seven sanctuaries and nature centers and our thousands of annual visitors, volunteers, and partners throughout the state. Audubon achieves its mission to protect birds and their habitats by connecting our vast and powerful network along the migratory flyways of the Americas through science, advocacy, education and on-the-ground conservation programs.

Before speaking on the Governor's 2017-2018 Executive Budget proposal and Audubon New York's 2017 priorities, I would like to extend our thanks to you and your colleagues for the significant environmental accomplishments achieved in the 2016 legislative session. Through your leadership and collaborative work with the Governor, New York achieved unprecedented levels of funding for our state's environment, providing critical resources to conserve open space, protect and improve water quality, upgrade aging infrastructure, prevent pollution and make New York more resilient in the face of climate change. In addition, we commend the legislature for providing an additional $200 million through the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act, advancing critical water infrastructure projects across the state and protecting water at its source. We are pleased to see the legislature once again prioritizing the safety and protection of New York fresh water resources this legislative session with the introduction of the Clean Water Bond Act of 2017.

Audubon New York looks forward to working with all of you and the Administration to advance legislation which protects New York's environment, while building off the successes of last year in order to create a more sustainable shared environment that benefits birds, wildlife, people, and New York State's economy.

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.

Dedicate at least $300 million to the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)

The EPF has proven to be a stable funding source for essential environmental programs in robust and challenging economic conditions. Now, more than ever, New York's leadership and commitment to conservation and environmental programming is of critical importance, as we face a changing political landscape nationally. An appropriation of at least $300 million for the EPF for fiscal year 2017-18 will help New York meet its 5-year Capital Improvements Plan while once again demonstrating your and New York's national leadership in protecting our environmental resources for generations to come.

Further Fostering 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.

A high priority initiative of Audubon New York's, which was included in the Governor's State of the State, but not supported in the Executive Budget is the **Empire Forest for the Future (EFF) Initiative**, a program for private forest landowners to reduce the conversion of forests to non-forest uses, and encourage sustainable forest management on privately owned lands - which account for 75% of the state's total forested property. This proposal includes modifications to forest tax law, grants to help landowners implement best forest management practices, and grants to support local governments and non-profits acquire and manage community forests.

Audubon New York is part of a diverse coalition of 24 organizations, representing **environmental, conservation, business, and forestry interests** that requested the Governor include funding for the EFF initiative in the upcoming amendments to the Executive Budget proposal. Our organizations, which are national, regional, and state-wide in our breadth, believe that this a comprehensive and forward thinking package, which will serve as a national model for preserving privately held forest lands while simultaneously boosting our forest economy. We are hopeful the Governor will include funding for this initiative in the 30-day amendments due later this week and will work with the Administration and legislature to advocate for the enactment of these important programs.

Supporting Continued Capital Investments in New York's Historic Places and Outdoors

We strongly support Governor Cuomo's proposal to continue significant capital improvements to our world-class parks, wildlife management areas, and the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves, as well as his proposal to create the Empire State Trail, a multi-year capital investment of $200 million. This initiative will help connect communities to many of New York's best bird watching destinations, increase access to green and open spaces, and be an economic driver for many communities.

Through 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. We look forward to working with the legislature to ensure that both agencies once again prioritize similar investments in protecting natural resources.

We also urge that sustainable development practices like energy efficient lighting and appliances, porous pavement, water efficient appliances, bird-friendly glass, and green roofs be prioritized in the implementation of these capital improvement projects.

The state's sustained attention to preserving and enhancing our historic and green places, not only helps connect people with New York's vast cultural and natural resources, promoting healthy recreation and educational opportunities, but also strengthens local economies and creates jobs. Each of these environmental capital investments will pay dividends for New York State, as every dollar of funds invested in land and water protection generates seven dollars in economic benefits for the state.

Maintaining Environmental Agency Budgets and Staff

In addition to New York Works funding, we greatly appreciate that the Governor's proposed budget has once again maintained staffing and operating budgets at our environmental state agencies. With management and stewardship responsibilities for the majority of the state's open space and natural resources, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the DEC, the New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation, and the Department of Agriculture and Markets are on the front lines of enhancing opportunities for our residents and visitors to enjoy New York's outdoors and biodiversity. The past budget cuts endured by these agencies have left them barely able to meet their mandated activities and safeguard our environment, and we look forward to working with the Governor and legislature on a long term strategy to reinvest in these agencies, and ensure they have the necessary resources and staff to appropriately conserve our open space and natural resources.

Funding for Clean & Safe Water

As you know, few issues are as important to our health, economy, and environment, as safe, reliable clean water. Audubon New York has been advocating for increased investments in water and wastewater infrastructure, investments in drinking source water protection, and other strategies to increase the state's capacity for dealing with challenges such as combined sewer overflows, harmful algal blooms, and toxic drinking water contamination.

In recent years, with the support of the legislature, our state has provided additional resources for drinking water and wastewater infrastructure. Resources first made available in the SFY 2015-16 budget – and the subsequent doubling of the available funding within the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act program in last year's budget – has made an enormous difference for communities who may not have otherwise had the means to repair and replace their degrading water infrastructure.

Despite these significant investments, current funding levels are still not adequate to address the backlog of necessary upgrades, repairs, and source water protection demands. 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. With your leadership, we have begun to make progress, however, more is needed to ensure that New Yorkers have access to clean and safe drinking water.

Audubon commends both the Governor and legislature for their bold water infrastructure funding proposals for FY 2017-2018. We are encouraged to see the prioritization of this issue by both branches and are encouraged to see the Governor's $2 billion Clean Water Infrastructure Act proposal and the legislature's $5 billion Clean Water Bond Act of 2017. We look forward to working with our colleagues, the Administration, and the legislature to achieve record levels of funding for clean water.

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.

Supporting the clean energy economy

The Executive Budget proposal focuses on spurring the transition to a clean energy economy through a variety of programs, including an expansion of the Cleaner Greener Communities program and a $360 investment in large-scale renewable projects through the Clean Energy Standard -- leveraging nearly $1 billion in private sector investments for clean technologies like wind, solar, fuel cells, and hydroelectric power.

These programs will help position the state as a national leader in moving toward a clean energy economy and is an essential step in the comprehensive strategy to combat the threat of climate change head on. We strongly urge the legislature to support these important proposals.

Influencing Federal Funding Decisions

As I mentioned earlier, now, more than ever we need New York's elected officials to continue to lead on environmental issues. While we expect those sitting before us today to continue to prioritize investments in protecting our state's clean water, air and green spaces, we must also ask that you play a role in holding the federal government accountable for doing the same. Recently, thanks to the help of the legislature, significant federal support has been secured for the Long Island Sound Restoration and Stewardship Acts, the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. In the coming months, as the President and Congress begin debate on the federal budget, we look forward to working with you to advocate for this funding for New York.

Meeting the demand for environmental improvements and protecting bird species from further decline will take creativity and a commitment from all levels of government. Audubon New York once again urges the legislature to support Governor Cuomo's proposal to maintain historic funding levels for the Environmental Protection Fund, continue funding to enhance our state parks, maintain our state agencies, and ensure that needed environmental investments are made to help stimulate the economy and keep New Yorkers working. Thank you again for allowing me to testify today, and should you need any additional information, please contact me at 518-869-9731 or ecrotty@audubon.org.