



SAVING THE LAND THAT MATTERS MOST

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**Preliminary Comments on SFY 2020 Executive Proposed Budget to the NYS Legislature  
 Prepared by Andy Bicking, Director of Public Policy and Special Projects**

**Scenic Hudson**

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**Introduction**

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to present a summary of Scenic Hudson's testimony on the State Fiscal Year 2020 budget proposal. We will provide supplemental testimony next week.

Scenic Hudson's priorities in the 2020 budget include appropriations and policy changes to encourage use of natural and working lands to sequester greenhouse gasses and expedite siting of appropriately sited solar energy facilities, and a \$300 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and strong capital and agency budgets to manage the lands and waters of the Hudson River Valley.

**Using Natural and Working Lands to Sequester Greenhouse Gasses (GHGs)**

New York has a tremendous opportunity to sequester GHGs to slow the pace of climate change through better management of natural and working lands. Up to 21 percent of the nation's GHGs can be captured through appropriate land management, according to a September 2018 study in Science Advances. Why? Because the same compounds that drive atmospheric change can be stored in soil as food for plants. The good news is there is a framework for supporting these practices through the Climate Resilient Farming (CRF), which provides voluntary incentive payments to create healthy soils and clean water.

Last year, Scenic Hudson commissioned a study of how land New York State could enhance its work in this area. Our researcher, Dr. Laura Lengnick, assessed the Agriculture Environmental Management and Climate Resilient Farming programs and engaged 200 agricultural stakeholders in the Hudson Valley. She found:

(1) Additional financial support for AEM and CRF programs, focused on new initiatives to increase farmer adoption of ecosystem-based conservation practices, would increase potential to amplify and expand the social benefits of public investments in agricultural programs, and

(2) Existing state conservation incentive investments are dominated by "resistance" strategies that slow the inevitable effects of climate change on farms, as opposed to "transformation" investments that proactively address the root causes of climate change. Reliance on strategies that resist the effects of climate change on working farms will become less effective, more costly, and more likely to fail if climate change accelerates as projected. Shifting conservation priorities to increase incentives for resilience, and investments that transform agricultural management practices to more intentionally sequester greenhouse gasses while at the same time enhancing soil health and

fertility, supports the climate-resilience of NYS agriculture. Thus, Scenic Hudson asks the Legislature to:

(1) Support enhanced funding for the state's CRF. Last year the Governor proposed \$2.5 million. This year he proposes \$5 million. We advise that new funding be directed to a Carbon Farming Pilot Study, and remaining new funding be directed to farmers to develop farmland conservation plans with the stated purpose of sequestering greenhouse gasses, a co-benefit to enhancing soil health.

(2) Support a Carbon Farming Pilot Study in the CRF Program to measure the effect of climate resilient farming practices on greenhouse gas sequestration and soil health, and document best practices to ensure future impact. Assemblywoman Didi Barrett championed this concept in last year's session, which passed both houses. The Governor did not sign the bill but kept his promise to fund the study this year. Scenic Hudson recommends the Legislature review Governor's proposal to ensure it aligns with legislative intent and clarifies parameters of the study.

(3) Support measures in the final budget that achieve long-term carbon sequestration and/or promote best management practices in land use, agriculture and forestry through the proposed Article 7 language for the Climate Leadership Act.

We will provide more detailed suggestions, and analysis of land-based programs in the EPF, next week.

### **Supporting Expedited Siting of Appropriately Sited Solar Energy Plants**

We applaud the Governor's call for aggressive renewable energy goals and recognize the Legislature's leadership in prior years. Yet, more work is needed to get renewable energy facilities sited in communities. Public opposition to renewable energy facilities in some communities in the Hudson Valley region has mounted to the point where additional costs, delay and even abandonment of proposed projects have become a reality. Without action, it will be difficult to achieve meaningful change.

We recommend the Legislature amend the Governor's Climate Leadership Act Article 7 proposal to provide for statewide-regional-landscape level planning, identify "least conflict zones" for developing utility-scale renewable energy, and prepare local government so they can embrace renewable energy and receive its economic and environmental benefits. To accomplish this, Scenic Hudson recommends that the Legislature:

(1) Propose competitive grant funding for local governments to identify "least conflict zones" based on statewide, regional and local values, and proactively plan to site renewable energy plants in their communities.

(2) Encourage regional collaboration when deciding on locations for renewable energy infrastructure. The Hudson Valley has a strong tradition of regionalism, embodied in the Hudson River Valley Greenway, Regional Economic Development Council, and other institutions that can provide lessons for how to accomplish this. Alternatively, the Upstate and Downstate Energy Boards, which already exist, could be a vehicle.

(3) Empower NYSERDA to include statewide-regional-landscape level planning to identify “least conflict zones” for utility-scale renewable energy projects in its programming.

(4) Encourage the Public Service Corporation to identify mechanisms that fast-track permit review of renewable energy facilities proposed to be sited in “least conflict zones,” as identified by the affected communities, and that offer meaningful benefits to the local community.

We will provide more detailed suggestions next week.

**Management of Lands and Waters of the Hudson River Valley Region: The Environmental Protection Fund, Hudson River Estuary Management, Hudson River Valley Greenway & Hudson Valley Trail Projects & Water Infrastructure, Bottle Bill Expansion, and Plastic Bag Ban**

Enabled through the Governor’s proposal for a \$300 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), and the Capital Budget, are a complement of programs that create jobs, address areas of environmental concern and improve quality of life in the Hudson River Valley, help the region to stay competitive, attract outside investments and continue to build our waterfront, tourism, recreation and agricultural economies.

The Hudson Estuary Management line in the EPF is proposed for \$6.5 million in the 2020 budget – the same as last year – yet, management needs associated with high levels of rainfall and flooding are impacting natural systems, local infrastructure, and access to the Hudson River waterfront. Scenic Hudson urges the Legislature to add \$500,000 to the Hudson Estuary Management line item in the state budget to address these and other climate-related concerns.

The Hudson River Valley Greenway works to encourage local actions aligned with regional planning needs and administers related funding. The agency is performing at high level in developing the Empire State Trail, administering federal National Heritage Area funds, and supporting local connector trails through the Hudson River Valley Trail Grants program. The 2020 budget proposes completing the Hudson River Watertrail. Scenic Hudson supports the Governor’s proposal for these initiatives.

Support for the Natural Resource Damage Assessment line item in the EPF is important to help the state recover damages from responsible parties when natural resources are injured and use such damages to restore those resources.

Funding for water infrastructure in the Hudson Valley administered through the Environmental Facilities Corporation remains a priority, and Scenic Hudson supports calls for additional investment in this area.

Scenic Hudson supports proposals to expand the Bottle Bill Redemption Law and institute a ban on plastic bags as measures to reduce solid waste and litter.

**For more information, please contact:**

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