

Testimony of the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK)

Joint Legislative Public Hearing, Environmental Conservation Portion 2021-2022

Executive Budget Proposal

27 January 2021

Good afternoon Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein and honored legislators. My name is Michael Barrett, ADK Executive Director, and I am very pleased to have the opportunity to represent our 30,000 members and testify today on the Governor's Executive Budget proposal.

ADK works to protect New York's wild lands and waters by promoting responsible outdoor recreation and building a statewide constituency of land stewardship advocates. Based out of the Adirondack Park in New York State, ADK is a leader in providing outdoor education, promoting responsible recreation, and organizing stewardship experiences. Since 1922, the organization has worked to increase access to the backcountry by building trails, conserving natural areas, and developing a stewardship community that supports the ethical and safe use of New York's outdoor spaces. A member and volunteer-supported organization, ADK reaches across New York through its 27 chapters to inspire people to enjoy the outdoors ethically.

EPF and Clean Water: In Governor Cuomo's State of the State presentations last week, he outlined his plan to "Reimagine, Rebuild, and Renew" New York. ADK was pleased to see that the Governor's vision for renewal includes **\$300 million** for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and **\$500 million** for clean water infrastructure.

Agencies and Capital Funding: We are also pleased to see **\$75 million** in capital funding ("NY Works" program) for the Department of Environmental Conservation (**DEC**); and **\$110 million** (each year for 4 years) in capital funding for NYS Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation (**OPRHP**).

Public Land Protection and Stewardship: Within the EPF there are several lines we would like to highlight for your support, including the ***Open Space/Land Conservation*** line (under the Open Space Account) which is proposed at **\$30 million** (a decrease of 1 million from last year), and the ***State Land Stewardship*** line (under the Parks and Recreation Account) at **\$35.665 million** (an increase of 1.265 million from last year).

These funds support public land acquisition, protection, and stewardship, including building and maintaining sustainable trails, educational outreach, and the Summit Stewardship Program which protects the Alpine Zone of the Adirondack High Peaks. With the ongoing pandemic and escalating climate crisis, we must maintain environmental programs and funding that improves public health, safeguards clean water, strengthens the economy, and allows New Yorkers to connect with the great outdoors.

Critical Need for Investment in the Forest Preserve of the Adirondack and Catskill Parks: This past year the Adirondack and Catskill Parks became a refuge and place of solace during the COVID crisis when many people turned to forests and wildlands as a safe place to relax, recreate, and maintain their physical and mental health. Many people came to the Adirondack and Catskill

Forest Preserve for the first time this past year increasing the use of these already extremely popular public lands.

We commend Governor Cuomo and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) for the creation over the past year of the Citizen Advisory Groups on High Use and for including ADK as an advisory member in both the Adirondack and Catskill groups. An essential next step will be implementing the recommendations of these groups. Although, the recommendations have yet to be finalized, we know there is a serious lack of investment directed to the Forest Preserve in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks despite the State actively promoting the Forest Preserve for outdoor recreation and recognizing that 12 million people visit the Adirondacks annually.

Over 120,000 visitors each year use ADK's Heart Lake Program Center to hike in the Adirondack High Peaks, or visit our facilities, including the High Peaks Information Center, Adirondack Loj and Wilderness Campground.

ADK sees every one of these visitors as a future steward of these lands, a growing member in an outdoor community devoted to safe and responsible outdoor recreation. ADK staff and volunteers provide education, trip planning services, and instill an outdoor ethic in every visitor they reach. But in order to achieve a greater impact, we need the state to provide outdoor recreators with the tools necessary to have the safe and responsible experience that we strive for.

Investing in recreational infrastructure in the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve is long overdue and must happen. We understand that this is a difficult ask after the Governor declared a \$15 billion deficit, but the failure to invest sufficiently in education, trails, appropriate access infrastructure, and safety is now resulting in calls to limit use through permits and fees, which will only hamstring efforts to improve diversity in the Forest Preserve and New York's outdoor communities. We have acknowledged the broad public benefit that these lands offer, now it's time to invest in impact-mitigating infrastructure so they remain available and accessible to all of New York's citizens.

We respectfully request that you consider the need for **an additional \$10 million** (not currently in the executive budget proposal) earmarked for Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve protection and stewardship (e.g., educational outreach, building and maintaining sustainable trails). This could be included in the EPF State Land Stewardship Account, or elsewhere in the budget. Also, due to the growing popularity of our public lands, we ask that you **support the New York State Forest Rangers with additional FTEs** for education, safety, and search and rescue operations. Last year we requested 40 new rangers to meet the need of pre-COVID visitation levels, but no new funding was provided.

Invasive Species: Another extremely important funding source in the EPF for protecting public lands and our communities is the ***Invasive Species*** line (under the Open Space Account) which is proposed in the executive budget for **\$13.3 million** (up from 13.238 last year).

Invasive species impact biodiversity and are one of the greatest threats to New York's environment. Invasive species degrade or destroy habitat, impact native fish, wildlife and tree populations, impact recreational opportunities and income, destroy agricultural crops, and impact human and livestock health.

EPF funding supports New York's eight regional [PRISMs](#) (Partnerships for Regional Invasive Species Management), which coordinate invasive species management, including partner efforts, citizen volunteers, education and outreach, early detection and monitoring, and direct eradication and control efforts.

Aquatic Invasive Species: There are more than 3,000 lakes and ponds, 1,500 miles of rivers, and 30,000 miles of brooks and streams in the Adirondacks. Protecting these priceless resources from degradation and habitat destruction that comes from the introduction of invasive species must be a top priority in the Adirondack Park. Due to efforts funded by the EPF to protect this incredible resource, 3 of 4 Adirondack lakes surveyed are free from invasives.

Hemlock Woolly Adelgid (HWA): The Governor's Executive Budget Proposal continues **\$500,000** in EPF support for **Cornell University's Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Project** (under the Open Space Account—Invasive Species), which is rearing natural predators of HWA, [Laricobius Beetles](#) and [Leucopis Silver Flies](#), and releasing them in the Catskill and Adirondack Parks (and in other areas of New York) to bring HWA under control. Hemlock Woolly Adelgid is an aphid-like insect from southern Japan that kills Eastern hemlock and Carolina hemlock trees. It was accidentally introduced to New York in the 1980s in or near New York City, likely through the nursery trade, and has been spreading throughout the state since that time. HWA was found in the Finger Lakes in 2008. There are also current infestations in Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. In 2017 HWA was confirmed in the Adirondacks near Lake George.

Hope for saving the Eastern hemlock trees is tied to the success of establishing natural predator populations in infested areas. Eastern Hemlock in both the Catskills and the Adirondacks and [across New York State](#) is an extremely important species due to its abundance, the third most common tree in New York State, and as its role as both [a foundation and climax species](#). As a foundation species, hemlock trees create the ecosystem in which they reside and serve as base of the food web in the areas they inhabit creating unique soil and water conditions. As a climax species hemlock creates a mature and very productive forest ecosystem. Hemlocks are irreplaceable in the landscape of the Adirondack and Catskill Parks and across New York. Their loss would be devastating.