



Fiscal Year 2022 Executive Budget Testimony

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing, Senate Finance and Assembly Ways & Means Committees

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Thank you Chairwoman Kruger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and members of the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means committees for the opportunity to weigh in on Governor Cuomo's FY 2022 Executive Budget.

Catskill Mountainkeeper's mission is to protect our region's wild lands and natural resources, support smart development to sustainably grow our economy, nurture healthy communities, and accelerate the transition to a 100% clean energy future in New York and beyond.

Testimony Overview

Mountainkeeper's testimony today covers the funding for the Catskill Park, funding New York's just transition to our renewable energy future, the Environmental Protection Fund, ending subsidies to fossil fuel companies, and supporting Sheridan Hollow Alliance for Renewable Energy's budget requests.

Funding the Catskill Park

The Catskill Park and Forest Preserve are New York State gems, and they need substantial investment to survive and thrive. While there are some funds devoted to Park protection and improvement via the Environmental Protection Fund's State Land Stewardship account, the time is past overdue for substantial dedicated funding source to protect and preserve this Forever Wild and park land.

The Catskill Park is made up of 705,500 beautiful acres, and the Forest Preserve encompasses 287,000 acres of pristine wildlife habitat, vital waterways, and unique communities. The Catskills serve as both as a place for wild land recreation and as the watershed for New York City, offering New Yorkers an unparalleled opportunity to recreate in nature while affording city residents some of the purest water in the country. Additionally, wild areas store vast amounts of greenhouse gases and help mitigate impacts of the climate crisis.

The Advocate for the Catskills

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In addition to the fundamental ecosystems benefits and recreational benefits that the Catskill Park provides to New York and New Yorkers, the Park served in 2020 as an important public health resource, offering an environment in which people could interact safely during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic. Visitor numbers to the Park increased for many reasons, and the choice by many individuals and families to go to the Park instead of to crowded indoor facilities for recreation, meals, movies, and other emotionally supportive interactions undoubtedly helped to reduce viral exposures and spread. This benefit can be expected to continue into 2021 and beyond, making budgetary support for keeping the parks open and well maintained all the more imperative.

Further, the Park and Forest preserve drive the economy in our region. According to a 2018 report, the most recent year for which complete data is available, outdoor recreational activities that rely on public, protected lands attracted a total of 1,765,969 visitors. These visitors spent an estimated \$75,473,830 in the area, had an estimated economic impact on the region's economy of \$55,082,946 (value added), and supported 846 jobs.

While the data has not yet been compiled to calculate similar numbers for 2020, this year we saw a tremendous increase in the number of visitors to the Park and Region—and with those visitors come impacts both good and bad. The Region is up to more than 12 million visitors per year (more than the Adirondacks and roughly twice the visitorship of the Grand Canyon). In 2020 visitors to the Blue Hole swimming hole increased by 60% over 2018. Visitors to Kaaterskill Falls increased by 8%. And in other Park destinations, including Alder Lake and North South Lake, visitors crowded into overflowing parking lots to get out on the trails and into the woods.

In 2019 Lonely Planet named the Catskills the number two destination in the world; Travel & Leisure named the Catskills one of its 50 Places to Visit in 2021; Vogue magazine included a Catskills hotel scheduled to open later this year as in one of the 23 Most Anticipated Hotel Openings of 2021; Forbes included Windam Mountain as an Editors Pick in its real estate piece, "Ski Towns See A Surge In Interest From Snowbirds"; a Google news search for "Catskills Blue Hole" returns 4,370 results. While this enthusiasm for and tourism in the Catskills can be embraced as a boon to local businesses and our economy, the lack of infrastructure and coordinated park management means that visitors can and have had serious impacts on trails and public lands.

High use in the Park can quickly lead to overuse, and the impact of these visitors is compounding, both in "hot spots" like the Blue Hole and Kaaterskill Falls, but also in other parts of the Park—trails and areas with a swimming hole or water feature are quickly rising in popularity. In many areas, the trailheads aren't prepared to accommodate the number of cars attempting to park; trash piles up in parking lots, along roadsides, and on the trail; trails are eroding and expanding, creating more edge habitat and more wildlife/visitor interactions; crowds of people overwhelm natural spaces.

To be clear: parks across the state and nation saw a huge influx of visitors this summer and many of the agencies managing these lands struggled with the same problems. What we saw at the "hot spots" in our region is not the result of inaction or mismanagement by any one entity—state government, regional and local government, and individuals all have a role to play in protecting the park. But here in the Catskills, where focused attention on effective, coordinated park management is a relatively recent phenomenon, we're behind the eight ball.

The good news is that this is a problem created by people that can be solved by people working together. With funding to support critical infrastructure needs like shuttle buses, parking lots, safety & information kiosks to guide visitors, outreach to potential visitors both at home and upon arrival in the park, trail and forest stewardship, and boots on the ground to help direct visitors and enforce the law, we can address the issues. It is imperative that New York maintain a welcoming, accessible park for visitors to enjoy, while conserving pristine wild places for the benefit of nature and the well-being of all the creatures who live here.

The Catskill Park and Forest Preserve are unique because they are managed differently from other state parks—they receive none of the Parks 2020 funding, nor will they receive any funding from the proposed \$110 million allocation for parks in the FY 2022 budget. Funding for the Park and Forest Preserve come through the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) budget and the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). While NYSDEC has been a leader in protecting the Park, without sufficient investment in human resources and infrastructure, the natural resources will continue to suffer.

Catskill Mountainkeeper calls on the legislature to appropriate \$10 million for Adirondack Forest Preserve and Catskill Park and Forest Preserve Stewardship; to direct \$5 million of that funding to the Catskill Park and Forest Preserve; and to include this funding in the Environmental Protection Fund.

Over 100 years ago, state leaders saw the wisdom of protecting vast areas of New York by declaring them Forever Wild and enshrining protections in our state constitution, and today we benefit from that forward thinking. We cannot let the excuse of budget shortfalls side-step our obligation to protect for New York's children.

This is the year to invest—the longer New York waits to address the mounting issues in the Catskills, the harder and more expensive they become to address.

Funding New York's Just Transition to Our Renewable Energy Future

Catskill Mountainkeeper is a founding member of NY Renews and is dedicated to eliminating New York's climate impacts while growing our clean energy economy, putting New Yorkers back to work, and investing in the low-income communities and communities of color that are being hit first and worst by the climate crisis.

Mountainkeeper fought hard alongside the legislature to enact the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), and we are calling on the legislature and Governor Cuomo to continue the work of that landmark law by funding the transition the CLCPA requires. The policy is strong: now it needs the investment to make it a reality.

The best way to fund the transition and climate solutions is by making climate polluters pay, and the Climate and Community Investment Act (CCIA) does just that. By putting a penalty on pollution, the CCIA will raise \$15 million per year to create hundreds of thousands of good jobs, transition every sector of our economy off of fossil fuels, and invest in Black, brown, and low-income communities bearing the brunt of the impacts of pollution and climate change. It would also protect workers and

communities impacted by that transition. Catskill Mountainkeeper calls on the Senate and Assembly to include the CCIA in their one-house budgets.

Further, the CLCPA mandates that New York invest 40% of our climate funds in environmental justice communities. **The Legislature’s one-house budgets should explicitly reflect this requirement to ensure that New York lives up to its commitment to center the climate fight on the Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income communities most at risk.**

The Environmental Protection Fund

New York’s Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is a huge asset—it creates and supports good jobs for New Yorkers, invests in the state’s wild areas, supports our work to adapt to the climate crisis, and upholds our commitment to clean air, water, and healthy communities.

Catskill Mountainkeeper applauds Governor Cuomo for his proposal to invest \$300 million in the EPF and calls on the Legislature to ensure it remains in the final budget. However, the Legislature should **reject the executive’s proposal to divert funds from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority and the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative to fund the EPF.** Doing so would be ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul’ and pulling funding from one important environmental program to pay for another.

Mountainkeeper also supports the funding for the Catskill Center, the Carey Institute, and the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid—all three of these programs provide important services for the Catskills, and our region would be diminished without them.

Finally, we call on the Legislature to provide oversight of EPF funding to ensure that it is contracted and spent in the fiscal year—otherwise the \$300 million would simply be an empty promise.

End Fossil Fuel Subsidies

As part of New York’s work to end climate-changing pollution, the state must stop subsidizing fossil fuels. According to the FY2020 [Annual Report on New York State Tax Expenditures](#), the state provides \$1.6 billion in subsidies to the fossil fuel industry. Unless those subsidies can be proven to directly benefit consumers, they should be eliminated. Subsidies that help New Yorker’s heat their homes or drive their cars should be phased out after consumers can easily switch off of fossil fuels.

Supporting SHARE’s Budget Requests

As part of Mountainkeeper’s work to fight against the impacts of the global climate crisis, advance solutions that will drive down New York’s contribution to the crisis, and serve as an ally to those on the front lines, we support the Sheridan Hollow Alliance for Renewable Energy’s budget requests for:

1. \$600,000 for a study to convert the Capitol and Empire State Plaza Complex (Plaza) to renewable energy;
2. \$250,000 for a study on how to transition the environmental justice communities of Sheridan Hollow and Arbor Hill to renewable energy communities; and
3. \$88,000,000 reappropriation in the Office of General Services Budget to continue current renewable projects for the Plaza.