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2021 Joint Legislative Environmental Conservation Hearing Testimony

**Submitted on behalf of the Police Benevolent Association of New
York State**

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State Job Location: Region 6 – St. Lawrence
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Testimony before: 2021 Joint Legislative Hearing Committee
on Environmental Conservation

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Introduction

Good evening respected members of the joint committee. My name is Peter Morehouse. I am a New York State Forest Ranger in DEC Region 6 and currently serve on the Board of Directors for the Police Benevolent Association of New York State (PBANYS). My testimony today will focus on the increasingly important role of NYS Forest Rangers, as well as our critical function as frontline workers during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this testimony will touch on the urgent need for the legislature to implement our “Pay Bill,” or Governor Program Bill #1 in 2021, which resulted from a March 2020 binding arbitration award that the Governor’s Office of Employer Relations agreed to with the PBANYS.

As NYS Forest Rangers, our primary mission is to provide public safety and state land protection through expertise in technical search and rescue operations, wildland fire, law enforcement, public outreach and education and emergency incident management. We are accustomed to working in dynamic environments and our combined skill sets continually lead to the successful completion of emergency

incidents in inclement weather, technical terrain and remote locations across the state and nation. For nearly a year, Forest Rangers have been working in leadership positions on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic response. Due to our expertise in emergency management, and our ability to unify a wide variety of agencies and individuals under the Incident Command System (ICS), Forest Rangers proved to be a tremendous asset to the State during these unique times.

When the COVID-19 pandemic initially hit New York State in March of 2020, I was assigned to a test site on Staten Island to assist with the State's strategic response. Between March 22nd and May 15th, I served as the Deputy Operations Section Chief and Operations Section Chief. My primary responsibilities during that time were to oversee the day-to-day operations of a large-scale drive-through test site and to facilitate coordination between clinical and non-clinical staff, the DMNA, NYSP, and various other state agencies. Many of my coworkers filled similar, crucial roles at sites on Long Island, throughout the five boroughs, in Rockland County, the Capital Region, Central NY and Western NY. At the height of our involvement, nearly 60% of our small force was working away from home on COVID-19 test sites, while the remaining Rangers worked tirelessly to maintain state land and protect the public recreating there.

In addition to the challenges presented by the pandemic, New York's public land faced unprecedented levels of use and periods of regional drought. These pressures led to a dramatic increase in search and rescue (up nearly 100 searches from 2019) and wildland fire responses by Forest Rangers. We have been on the front lines throughout the pandemic, while proudly maintaining our traditional job responsibilities. Our members have tested positive and faced concerns with possibly exposing their families and loved ones. It has been a stressful time period for the Forest Rangers, who prior to 2020, were already spread thin, low in numbers and under compensated. We continue to proudly serve the State of New York and meet the demands of diverse challenges, but it is not lost on our union that we are the only collective bargaining unit that is still on 2014 salary levels.

Governor Program #1 of 2021

With this our only ask of the legislature is to treat our union with decency and respect. In this regard, we ask that the Legislature immediately pass Governor Program Bill #1 for 2021. This legislation will ratify the terms and conditions of a binding arbitration award that our union recently received. Governor Program Bill #1 will bring our union's compensation levels up to 2018 levels, which is still three years behind other public employee unions. This will help boost morale within our union, as there is no question that we have earned the compensation adjustments that we received in arbitration.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. We have met with many of you to explain these critical issues. We know you all believe that the People of New York State deserve the very best to fight this pandemic, to protect the public and our state land. Today we are asking for your help. Please provide our union with reasonable compensation levels by enacting Governor Bill #1 of 2021.

THANK YOU