



**Testimony of The Land Trust Alliance Before the Joint Legislative Hearing on the
Environmental Conservation Portions of the Executive Proposed Budget for
New York State Fiscal Year 2021-22**

January 27, 2021

My name is Meme Hanley, and I am the New York Senior Program Manager for the Land Trust Alliance. On behalf of the state's more than 85 land trusts and their champions, members and supporters, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the Governor's proposed environmental funding in the 2021-22 Executive Budget.

I am honored to share with you our commitment to advancing land conservation by empowering the work of land trusts across the state. We are proud of the Governor's and the Legislature's commitment to protecting open space for the many benefits it provides the public and today ask for your continued investment and partnership. Working together, alongside our many partners, we are improving the quality of life for our neighbors across the state.

Open spaces, of all kinds, have risen in prominence in the minds of many New Yorkers since the arrival of COVID-19. Land trusts leaned in, despite big challenges, to stay open for the public, accommodate greatly increased rates of visitation safely, and ramp up food production to feed hungry families from community gardens. We worked hard to stay focused on serving our communities. I can proudly say that land trusts accomplished this, and much more. Now, we must prepare for even greater challenges, including continuing, increased need and demand and helping to mitigate the effects of a changing climate.

We appreciate and commend Governor Cuomo's plan to invest at least \$300 million in the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). We support an EPF that includes \$2.5 million for the highly successful Conservation Partnership Program, at least \$18 million in farmland protection and \$3 million for the Land Trust Conservation Easement Program. We also support reappropriations that are necessary for these programs, particularly as the pandemic and budget crisis have slowed spending.

The Land Trust Alliance works to save the places people need and love by strengthening land conservation across America. In New York, the Alliance serves as a leader, convener, partner, and technical assistance provider to a well-coordinated network of nonprofit land trusts. These relationships provide the opportunity to see, first hand, the benefits of the EPF and the role it plays in communities across the state. Public-private initiatives funded through the EPF such as the

Conservation Partnership Program (CPP) and the Land Trust Conservation Easement Program advance the state's conservation and economic development objectives with projects that are locally developed and broadly supported.

Land trusts work in every region, including the Adirondacks, Western New York, the Finger Lakes, Tug Hill Plateau, Genesee Valley, Upper Delaware River Region, Hudson River Valley, Catskill Mountains, New York City and Long Island. Land trusts also save green space and promote community gardens in The Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan and in cities like Albany, Buffalo, Rochester, and Kingston. These permanently protected places provide fresh food, clean air and water, and wildlife habitat and help strengthen communities by providing opportunities for people to enjoy the nurturing health benefits of being outdoors.

Now, more than ever, land conservation is playing an important role in mitigating the worst effects of climate change, offering healthy outdoor opportunities for families during the COVID crisis, improving health, building community and boosting local economies.

Land Trusts are proven partners

- To date, local, regional and national land trusts operating across New York State have permanently conserved more than 2.7 million acres through conservation easements, land acquisitions and re-conveyances.
- New York's land trusts are engaging more members of their communities than ever before. New York's land trusts now count nearly 10,000 active volunteers and draw direct support from more than 73,000 members and donors, mostly from their own local communities.
- Land trusts are serving more people, in more places than ever before. The pandemic has created a surge of interest in the outdoors and a need for green spaces. Today we see land trusts working in rural, suburban and urban areas, identifying ways that land conservation can have tangible benefits by increasing food security, providing flood and storm mitigation, supplementing virtual and in-person classroom learning and supporting neighborhood stability.

Taking Action:

A cornerstone of the EPF is appropriations for open space. It is imperative to right-size this open space funding to reflect the growing needs and priorities of our state. We are concerned that the Executive Budget reduces the open space allocation to \$30 million. The consequences of this action and cuts in previous years are adding up. We hope you will work to restore this funding to its historic levels, including through an increased EPF or Environmental Bond Act in the near future.

The consequences of allowing this funding to be eroded will be felt for years to come and will saddle future generations with an unhealthy environment, too few open spaces and leave them vulnerable to climate change impacts, like increased flooding.

Continue Investing in the Conservation Partnership Program at \$2.5 Million

As local, nonprofit organizations, land trusts engage private landowners in efforts to conserve and enhance our most important natural resources – prime agricultural soils, local farms and community

gardens; lakes, streams, wetlands, municipal watersheds and aquifers; forests and critical wildlife habitat; fragile coastal areas and estuaries. Land trusts have the local knowledge, technical expertise and commitment to perpetuity that makes them excellent partners to the state and municipalities.

Continued investment in the Conservation Partnership Program will make certain that the rich legacy of conservation we enjoy today endures and that people in all regions can benefit from the EPF.

- The CPP is a model of efficiency: Annually appropriated dollars are awarded to land trusts under a single contract with the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), delivering tangible impacts for communities and directly advancing New York's Open Space Plan.
- Over the past 17 years, the CPP has awarded 997 grants totaling \$21.7 million to 91 land trusts across the state. Grant funds have helped leverage at least \$23 million in local matching funds and have supported the protection of more than 36,000 acres.
- Administered by the Land Trust Alliance in partnership with the DEC, CPP funds are disbursed annually through a competitive grant process, creating immediate, lasting, and visible impacts on job creation, drinking water protection, recreational opportunities and community resilience to the impacts of climate change.

Investments in the CPP have built New York's land trust community to be one of the strongest in the nation. As a result of these investments, land trusts also serve as vital partners to both the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the Department of Agriculture and Markets. We do this by being able to respond quickly to protect and hold key lands, to accommodate visitors, and to hold conservation easements on farms that are feeding families and launching the next generation of farmers.

We urge you to continue funding the CPP at \$2.5 million in FY2021-22.

Land Trusts can Accelerate the Rate of Conservation for Agricultural and Forest Lands

One of most notable achievements of the EPF is the substantial investments that have been made in protecting farmland. By working with land trusts to conserve agricultural land across the state, the EPF has helped preserve an important part of our economy and a way of life for thousands of farm families. Land trusts are proud to have been a partner in helping the state protect more than 75,000 acres of farmland through the Farmland Protection Grants program. As farmers age and issues of farm succession become more pressing, work to ensure farms stay in production is vitally important. We urge you to ensure this work is well funded at least \$18 million.

Continue to support a bold new program for the protection of New York's forests, which provide critical benefits:

- Forests store carbon dioxide: Conserving them can draw down the carbon pollution that causes climate change.

- Forests filter water: They improve water quality for millions of New Yorkers.
- Forests provide jobs: Sustainable forestry and forest products generate important economic activity throughout the state each year.
- Forests provide important habitat for wildlife and recreation for people.

While we have huge, publicly owned forests in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks and state forest areas, 75% of New York's forests are privately owned. These assets have been stewarded by forest owners, who now confront many of the same issues that are facing family farmers. The median age of a forest owner is 60, and most do not have a viable plan for the long-term future of their forest lands. In preparing for the Land Trust Conservation Easement Program, land trusts identified \$70+ million in potentially eligible projects from all over New York. These lands are at risk of conversion at a time when New Yorkers need forests more than ever as a first line of defense in a changing climate.

The average income of most family forest owners in New York State is less than \$100,000, putting their forests at high risk for conversion due to the high costs of carrying property, such as property taxes. The average parcel size for a family forest is generally too small to fall under the criteria for state protection. In addition, for many forest landowners, their assets are in the land; therefore, they are not in a position to donate their lands. Many forest owners are left with limited options to protect their property. The new Land Trust Conservation Easement Program, established with funding in last year's EPF, is a meaningful step in addressing this problem. The pandemic has caused land prices to grow at breathtaking pace, further pressuring forest owners to sell. Increasing the ability of land trusts to protect forests now will reduce the risk of losing these lands forever.

We urge you to support the Governor's proposal to fund, as part of the Open Space Account, the Land Trust Conservation Easement Program at \$3 million.

In Closing

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on the proposed FY2021-22 budget. Providing the people of New York with an EPF that meets today's needs and solves tomorrow's problems is key to our state's long-term health and well-being. This can only be done by fully funding the EPF, investing in land trusts and conservation easements, and supporting the programs that complement these efforts.

In the near future, we also look forward to playing a strong role in the development, passage, and successful implementation of an Environmental Bond Act, which we believe will help rebuild New York's economy by providing additive funds to the EPF and other important initiatives.