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**2024 Joint Legislative
Environmental Conservation
Hearing Testimony**

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

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Introduction

Good afternoon members of the legislature. My name is Art Perryman. I have been a New York State Forest Ranger for 22 years and currently stationed in Region 5, Warren County. I am also a board member of the Police Benevolent Association of New York State (“PBA of NYS”). I am here today to testify about the status of the Forest Ranger Division within the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

This year the Forest Ranger Division continued to use our expertise in The Incident Command System to manage large incidents around the state. We continued to protect state lands and the people who use those lands through law enforcement and education. We responded to and fought wildland fires. We also responded to hundreds of search and rescue missions in the State of New York.

20 Year Retirement

I want to discuss the issue of parity and equity with respect to retirement benefits. As you are aware, the vast majority of police titles in NYS and the nation have a 20-year retirement plan. In fact, only 4% of police officers in the police and fire retirement system do not. The same is true of paid structural fire fighters. The vast majority can retire with 20 years on. Our closest counterpart in the federal system is the National Park Law Enforcement Rangers who are police, fight wildland fires and conduct search and rescue missions in exactly the same fashion we do. A number of NPS rangers work right here in the State of New York. NPS Rangers enjoy a 20-year retirement with a mandatory retirement age of 57.

Forest Rangers do a job that combines police duties with wildland fire fighting and emergency response. In other words, we are required to work in both worlds and be exposed to risk from both worlds. Our members operate in environments of extreme stress for many days on end. The physical demands are high, wear and tear on joints is high, exposure to smoke and other toxins are high. Not surprisingly, the rate of injury is also high in Forest Rangers because of the work we do. When compared to other titles, Forest Rangers have the highest rate of injury in the DEC.

In order to become a Forest Ranger only select science-based degree programs qualify you for taking the civil service test. A Forest Ranger exits the academy after 30 weeks of training with all DCJS police requirements as well as the specialized training needed to be a Forest Ranger. All the

comparable titles with 20-year retirement fall well below the educational requirements to become a Forest Ranger. In addition, they spend less time in an academy setting.

The State of New York needs to be looking ahead to ensure there is a plentiful and diverse pool of applicants to take the Forest Ranger Exam. To that end I believe it is essential to offer a competitive retirement plan that is comparable to other police and professional firefighters in the State of New York and across the nation. Forest Rangers need to have 20-year retirement. The people of New York State deserve Forest Rangers chosen from the very best we have to offer. In order to do that this state must at least offer the industry standard in police and fire retirement.

Unfortunately, it appears that we will not be able to fill our numbers in the academy this year from the pool of qualified candidates. I consider it a major failure of NYS when the Forest Rangers can't recruit enough people to fill a 25-person academy.

Wildland Fire

In the past, I've focused my testimony to this committee on the Search and Rescue and law enforcement aspects of the Forest Ranger mission. However, today I need to focus on our Wildland Fire fighting and fire management mission. In the interest of the public, a higher priority needs to be placed on Fire Management in the Forest Ranger Division. The Forest Rangers are the front line of defense when it comes to large destructive wildfires and have been since our inception. It is absolutely critical that Forest Rangers get the qualifications and experience that they need to function in such a dangerous and demanding environment. We do not currently have the resources and support that we need to adequately address that mission.

New York State Forest Rangers have become nationally respected for fighting wildfires across the west, Alaska, and Canada. Out of state deployments give Forest Rangers the required training to combat large wildfires and also manage large incidents using the Incident Command System. The program is absolutely essential to maintain wildland fire qualifications and expertise here at home. With recent and anticipated retirements, the Forest Ranger force is facing an alarming lack of qualified people making their way up through the ranks. They can only get these qualifications from working on large wildfires out of state. In short, to be ready for these large destructive fires in our own state we need to come to the aid of others first.

The great news is that Forest Ranger salaries and all associated costs are entirely reimbursed when working out of state. Wildland engines and crews bring federal dollars back into the State budget. There is no additional tax burden or cost to training our firefighters to be the best and most highly experienced.

Last year 38 new Forest Rangers entered the field and we had approximately 70 Forest Rangers ready to answer the call to assist with Canadian wildfires. Despite the air quality crisis that impacted New York State, we sent only 16 firefighters, 8 at a time to assist with 12.8 million acres burning in Quebec and Nova Scotia. Conversely, Quebec sent New York a 20-person crew to help combat a 142 acre fire the previous year. An important opportunity was missed to reciprocate appropriately and get Forest Rangers critical experience.

The 45.7 million acres burning across Canada released an estimated 480 mega tons of carbon into the atmosphere. According to NYSERDA's numbers that's far more than the total yearly carbon emissions generated in New York State. The last time New York experienced that kind of smoke condition was when hundreds of thousands of acres of New York's forests burned early in the 20th century. As a direct result, the Forest Ranger title was created and given legislative authority to enforce laws and direct the suppression of forest fires. I sincerely hope that the air quality crisis we experienced this year demonstrates the importance of protecting our own forests. Eventually New York will experience these wildfires on a vast scale again. It is time for New York State to take a greater role in fighting and preparing for large scale wildfires.

To this end I am calling on the DEC to create a separate fund that holds federal fire grant dollars and federal reimbursements separate so that those dollars are available for use the next year. These funds would only be available for use in the Forest Ranger wildland fire program and would facilitate response to out of state wildfires the next season. In addition, it should be the expressed goal of the department to give each Forest Ranger an opportunity to continue their professional development on at least one out of state wildfire each year. Finally, the department needs to finish the procurement of new wildland fire engines before the 2024 spring fire season.

Equipment

The DEC needs to create a separate and distinct budget with appropriate funding set aside for the Forest Ranger division. Even though the department has pledged a good faith effort to adequately outfit Forest Rangers, we are still

buying much of our own gear. Last year the not-for-profit Forest Ranger Foundation was created to assist rangers getting the gear and equipment they need. Although progress has been made in procuring quality equipment there is still much work to do.

For instance, in 2022 the PBA asked DEC to increase the boot allotment that Forest Rangers are given to purchase fire boots, technical rescue boots, hiking and uniform boots. In 1994 the reimbursement was \$125 which adjusted for inflation, should be close to \$300 in 2024. In response, the department agreed to raise the allotment to a mere \$175 which is still far below the cost of virtually any of the required boots to safely do the job. In some cases, new hires are spending thousands of dollars out of pocket to pick up where the department leaves off. This is unacceptable and needs to change.

Search and Rescue Missions

Forest Rangers are part of the communities where we live and part of the larger community of people who share the same love of the outdoors. We are proud of the many diverse ways we serve this community, but our hundreds of lifesaving search and rescue missions rank paramount.

Rangers often need to be lowered from helicopters, use chainsaws, stay interior for days at a time, set up communication relays, manage multiple resources, use advanced land navigation, and search in extreme terrain. If you find yourself lost or seriously injured, there is no substitute for a well-trained, equipped, and experienced Forest Ranger.

This past year was no exception. We had many occasions where Forest Rangers were responding to multiple rescues, searches, and recoveries all at once. Forest Rangers are never required or compensated to be on-call but always rally to handle these incidents, coming in from days off and leaving family functions to be there. These incidents come when least expected and Rangers have always risen to the occasion.

Conclusion

We have met with many of you to explain these critical issues. We have made it our career and calling to help people in their hour of need. Please help us ensure that our members get the support they deserve.