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Testimony of the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK), Joint Legislative Public Hearing,
Environmental Conservation Portion of the 2025-2026 Executive Budget Proposal, January 28, 2025

The Catskill and Adirondack Parks collectively represent one quarter of New York State's land mass. The Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves are the lungs of New York, a great force to combat climate change, providing oxygen, filtering water, cooling streams, lakes, and lands by affording shade, and sequestering climate-altering carbon. They protect wildlands and water, preserve mature forests and habitat, and provide fresh drinking water to millions of New Yorkers. With over 2,000 miles of recreational trails, they offer access for health and well-being and support local and state economies.

Thank you for your leadership and support in providing \$10 million in dedicated funds for the Catskill and Adirondack Parks in last year's State Land Stewardship category of the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). Thank you also for your support last year for Adirondack and Catskill visitor centers, science facilities, research, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, including accessibility.

In November, ADK, Catskill Center, and **over 40 Adirondack and Catskill groups and municipalities** signed a letter to Governor Hochul highlighting the need to continue support for the Adirondack and Catskill Parks.

We requested support for the following for FY 25-26

- **\$500 million for the Environmental Protection Fund**
- **\$12 million in dedicated Forest Preserve funding** in the EPF under state land stewardship with a focus on trail monitoring, maintenance and rebuilding; visitor information; accessibility and DEI; and transportation and parking solutions.
- **\$100 million for DEC's Adventure NY capital projects funding** with a goal to double current funding
- **DEC staff increases of 225 FTEs**, including in the Divisions of Lands and Forests and Operations
- Visitor Centers and Educational Stewards
- Science Facilities, Research, and Monitoring
- DEIA initiatives
- Accelerated land acquisition processes to meet conservation and climate goals
- Smart Growth program
- Connect Kids program
- PTNY Grants
- Historic sites, including Camp Santanoni and Fire Towers

The Executive Budget Proposal provides only \$400 million for the EPF, only \$8 million for dedicated stewardship funding for the Adirondacks and Catskills, only \$90 million for DEC's Adventure NY/NY Works capital funding, fewer than 60 new staff for DEC, and completely zeros out some of the visitor centers and science facilities. Fortunately, within the EPF many of the other requests are supported and some funding lines increased over last year's final budget. Of course, without an increase to the EPF overall this has resulted in some programs now needing to be restored in the one-house budgets and in the final budget. We were happy to see \$200 million for capital projects in New York State

Parks, and to see the commitment to clean water funding in the Executive Budget Proposal but urge the legislature to allocate \$600 million to the Clean Water Infrastructure Act. We were very encouraged by the State of the State book on page 146 which seemed to indicate that land acquisition processes were going to be accelerated by streamlining processes and modernizing the use of title insurance to expedite land acquisitions, but the promised changes did not make it into the Executive Budget Proposal which was disappointing.

The table below summarizes the EPF in terms of funding requested by Adirondack and Catskill groups and what is proposed in the Executive Budget. Unshaded table lines show requested increases or needed restoration.

| Environmental Protection Fund | FY24-25 Enacted | FY25-26 Exec Prop | Request | Restore |
|---|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| **000s omitted. Some numbers rounded. | | | | |
| TOTAL EPF | \$400 million | \$400 million | \$500 million | |
| Parks and Recreation Account | | | | |
| State Land Stewardship | \$47,000 | \$49,000 | \$50 million | |
| <i>Parks & Trails NY Grants Program</i> | \$2,000 | \$2,500 | \$4 million | |
| <i>Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety & wilderness protection</i> | \$10,000 | \$8,000 | \$12 million | |
| <i>Ausable River Association for Adirondack Lake ecosystem study</i> | \$2,000 | \$1,500 | \$2.5 million | |
| <i>Adirondack Mountain Club visitor centers</i> | \$250 | \$0 | \$250 | Restore |
| <i>Adirondack Architectural Heritage Camp Santanoni Mngt</i> | \$500 | \$750 | Support | |
| Municipal Parks | | | | |
| <i>SUNY ESF for Adirondack VICs</i> | 250 | 250 | Support | |
| <i>Paul Smiths for Adirondack VICs</i> | 250 | 250 | Support | |
| <i>Catskill Center for Conservation and Development VIC</i> | 250 | 250 | Support | |
| Open Space Account | \$39,500 | \$37,500 | \$50 million | |
| Biodiversity | | | | |
| <i>Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies Catskill Research</i> | \$180 | \$180 | \$200 | |
| <i>Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute</i> | \$100 | \$0 | \$200 | Restore |
| <i>SUNY Albany Atmospheric Sciences Research Center</i> | \$100 | \$0 | \$200 | Restore |
| Invasive Species | \$18,550 | \$18,550 | \$20 million | |
| <i>Cornell Hemlock Woolly Adelgid project</i> | \$500 | \$500 | Support | |
| Environmental Justice | | | | |
| <i>SUNY ESF Center for Native Peoples and the Environment</i> | \$1,142 | \$1,142 | Support | |
| <i>Connect Kids Outdoor Recreation Program</i> | \$3,000 | \$3,500 | Support | |
| Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Account | | | | |
| <i>Timbuctoo Pipeline Summer Climate and Careers Institute</i> | \$1,250 | \$1,250 | Support | |
| <i>Smart Growth Grants</i> | \$3,800 | \$3,800 | \$4 million | |

Additional budget requests by Adirondack Groups: \$420,000 Adirondack Diversity Initiative. (This item in ATL Exec Proposal)

Additional Budget Request by Catskill Groups: \$100,000 for educational stewards in ATL split between Catskill Center and Catskill Mountainkeeper (this does not appear to be in the Exec Proposal)

Increase the dedicated funding line for the Catskills and Adirondacks

This line is critical for protecting wilderness, providing safe and welcoming visitor experiences, and supporting communities. Studies show that the Forest Preserve and its wilderness experiences, such as hiking, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing, help sustain regional economies and private property values in the Adirondacks and Catskills. **Continued funding is essential** to implement the vision outlined by the Catskill Strategic Planning Advisory Group (CAG) and the Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group (HPAG) to address high use of popular areas in the Forest Preserve and the communities that surround them. Projects being implemented with this funding including the expansion of trail work, more educational stewards, improvements to recreation infrastructure (e.g., trailheads, parking, and water access), projects to improve inclusivity and accessibility, critical materials (e.g., materials for bridges, docks, camp sites, parking and day use areas), ecological monitoring, and Visitor Use Management (VUM) planning and implementation. **The dedicated funding for the Forest Preserve has been a huge boost** for stewardship projects **but with thousands of miles of trails in need of maintenance and repair** and many state land units not yet developed for public access, **it is simply scratching the surface of this need.**

Restore support for Forest Preserve Visitor Centers

Continued and restored funding of these strategic centers, which rely heavily on private fundraising, is critical as they serve to protect the Forest Preserve, keep recreators safe, educate youth and the public, and highlight community assets. Adirondack Mountain Club's (ADK) Visitor Centers, the High Peaks Information Center (HPIC) at the trailhead, and the Cascade Welcome Center on Rt 73 are essential infrastructure for the Adirondacks and the High Peaks Wilderness. They are **a year-round resource** for hikers, backpackers, snowshoers, and cross-country skiers, providing trip planning, weather reports, trail conditions, maps, guidebooks, and essential gear for rent or purchase to ensure recreators have safe, enjoyable adventures. They provide **year-round access to skilled education staff, 24-hour flush toilet bathroom facilities**, as well as additional summer porta-jons which reduce the pressure on backcountry privies and the impacts of improperly disposed of human waste. The Visitor Centers provide essential **preventative search and rescue (PSAR) education** to help avoid preventable rescues by an already overstressed Forest Ranger force. When hikers get lost or injured, they also serve as **a base for NYS Forest Rangers** who coordinate Search and Rescue events. ADK also runs trained volunteer **educational stewards in the parking area of the HPIC** to make sure hikers are prepared with gear and skills before they hit the trail. These are critical services at this trailhead to the High Peaks, which is the busiest in New York State, and on Rt 73, the busiest travel corridor in the Adirondack Park. For many visitors to the Adirondacks, their interaction with staff at the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) Visitor Centers is their only opportunity to engage with a knowledgeable authority on the Adirondack Park.

Continued Support for Research and Monitoring

Research and monitoring, which are called for in both the HPAG and CAG reports, are essential to inform management actions, evaluate the health of the Forest Preserves. Several facilities and projects in the Adirondacks and Catskills specialize in monitoring of biodiversity, air and water quality, and climate resilience including, The Adirondack Watershed Institute (**AWI**), The Atmospheric Sciences Research Center (**ASRC**) Whiteface Mountain Field Station, and **Cary** Institute of Ecosystem Studies, and the *Survey of Climate Change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems (SCALE)*, and its project partners. These facilities track pollutants in air and water, monitor weather, disseminate data, and run essential programs like the **Catskill Science Collaborative**.

Increase DEC Capital Funding and Staff

The need for capital projects in the Forest Preserve is huge, but DEC gets only \$90 million for 4.5 million acres of managed public lands and conservation easements across the state. **DEC's capital funding should be increased significantly** to have parity with the funding available to

the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), which has over twice the funding available for capital projects for about 400,000 acres. To move funding to projects in a timely manner, processes geared toward efficiency and streamlining within DEC and other agencies and offices who administer grants, contracts and acquisitions should be implemented immediately. Staffing increases are needed in the Division of Lands and Forests and in the Division of Operations. We appreciate the increase in DEC staff made in recent years, however a large portion of the increased staffing went towards implementing new programs related to the Bond Act and state climate goals. There is a need for strategic staff additions to DEC. We urge the addition of approximately 225 new FTEs throughout different divisions and offices within DEC to enable efficient program implementation.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Accessibility (DEIA)

It is essential to support programs and opportunities in Park communities that will build capacity in **DEIA**, such as the work of the **Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI)**, the **Timbuctoo Summer Climate and Careers Institute**, the **SUNY ESF Center for Native Peoples and the Environment**, **Paul Smith's John Dillon Park**, and the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report** led by the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC) and the Open Space Institute (OSI). Dedicated stewardship funding is also needed to **continue support for accessibility** in the Adirondacks and Catskills. Appropriately located accessible and sustainable trail infrastructure that protects natural resources, and provides opportunities for all visitors whether they be families, new recreators, or individuals with mobility challenges. **We applaud the creation of the DEC Accessible Recreation Destinations map** to provide comprehensive and accurate information for the public. **We also applaud DEC for the creation of the new office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Civil Rights which unites accessibility with civil rights and DEI issues.** We urge DEC to **develop a comprehensive accessibility policy** to guide and promote accessibility and inclusivity on its managed lands statewide, including the Forest Preserve.

Invest in Adirondack and Catskill Park Communities

Park Towns and Villages are integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Parks that **need infrastructure support for quality of residential life, and for safe and enjoyable visitor experiences that help support regional economies.** In the Adirondacks, the Common Ground Alliance (CGA) and the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages (AATV), and in the Catskills, the Catskill Park Coalition (CPC), meet annually to collaborate and develop priorities on whole park issues that include the needs of communities within the park as well as recreation and ecological concerns. **Smart Growth Grants** and other EPF funding should be increased and coupled with other investments such as Bond Act funding to update infrastructure in Park communities. Funding should also be retained for **Historic sites** that draw thousands of visitors to communities each year **such as Camp Santanoni**, and the network of historic fire towers and Park sites with friends' groups who are funded by **Parks and Trails NY EPF stewardship grants.**

Accelerate Land Acquisition to Meet Conservation and Climate Goals

At a time when the future of the planet depends on protecting open space, land protection should be one of NY State's highest priorities. NYS land acquisition has slowed down to a trickle. In the 2000s – 2010s, DEC and OPRHP were purchasing an average of 70,000 acres (fee and easement) annually. **In 2020 this dropped to 6,005 acres and DEC only purchased 4,416 acres in 2022.** **Currently NYS Land Trusts have purchased and are holding over 96,000 acres of land** that NY State asked them to buy with a fair market value of over \$150 million. Most of this acreage is in the Forest Preserves. NY Land Trusts' "holds" are longer than 5 years; in the past this hold period averaged two years. This severely reduces land trusts' ability to protect open spaces. **Fixing this issue is the only way that New York will meet its climate and 30x30 goals.**

Thank you for your work and leadership in caring for the great State of New York and the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks. We appreciate your attention to these important requests.

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Since 1922 ADK (Adirondack Mountain Club) has been working to protect New York State wild lands and waters by promoting responsible outdoor recreation, building trails, conserving natural areas, and developing a stewardship community. We are a member, donor, and volunteer-supported organization reaching across New York State through 27 chapters and 30,000 members to inspire people to enjoy the outdoors ethically. ADK's educational efforts include school programs reaching up to 600 fourth graders annually; skills workshops and guided trips with 1,000 participants annually; the Summit Stewardship program reaching up to 40,000 hikers each year on the Adirondack High Peaks to protect fragile alpine habitat; and two visitor interpretive facilities, the High Peaks Information Center which yearly serves 100,000 recreators, and the new Cascade Welcome Center on Rt 73, the busiest travel corridor in the Adirondacks. Additionally, ADK's professional and volunteer trail crews provide highly skilled backcountry trail builders who take on some of the most challenging projects in wilderness areas. In the past year, ADK trail crews and volunteers spent over 7,000 hours building and maintaining 100 trails and over 200 lean-tos.