



## Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the Transportation Portion of the Executive Budget Proposal for Fiscal Year 2025-2026 February 6, 2025

Greetings Chair Krueger, Chair Magnarelli and honored legislators. My name is Sawyer Bailey, and I am the Executive Director of AdkAction. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

AdkAction is a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organization dedicated to solving problems to help people and nature thrive together in the Adirondack Park. We strive to enhance the social, economic, and cultural life of local residents while conserving the long term natural resources of the Park. We offer the following testimony in response to the transportation portion of the Governor's Executive Budget proposal for the 2025-2026 fiscal year.

### **Road salt pollution is a public health emergency, and it is harming New York families.**

Clean water and safe roads – it's this careful balance for which we strive. Unfortunately, groundwater pollution from winter road salt has already significantly compromised the health of our residents, created undue homeowner expense, jeopardized property values, and affected the vegetation and aquatic ecosystems of the Adirondack Park. We may be speaking about the budget for a single agency, but this is a matter that cuts to the very core of our State's values, our duty of care for our citizens, and our duty to manage our state's resources.

Salt contamination from state highways has polluted fresh waters throughout the Adirondacks and across New York, at times to extents comparable to saltwater estuaries. This affects the thousands of citizens who rely on private well water for their drinking, cooking, and washing. Of nearly 500 wells tested by Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute across the Adirondacks in 2019, 64% exceeded sodium levels set by the EPA. The most significant contamination zones are abundantly clear: wells downslope of state highways.

For 15 years, AdkAction has been working towards salt reduction. In that time, we have encountered too many New Yorkers whose lives are devastated by the impacts of oversalting. We have met generational dairy farmers who have had to give up their herds and their family's way of life because their water is too salty to support their cattle. We have met families who chose to make a home in the Adirondacks, a place they love for its pristine environment, only to find the well serving their newly purchased home was contaminated from road salt. Their only solution, installing and maintaining a costly reverse osmosis system at their own expense due to the actions of their government. Years later, they are still paying it

off. I have spoken with longtime Adirondack residents who need to drive to a roadside spring three to four times a week to fill gallons of plastic bottles because their well water was contaminated by salt and they cannot afford year round water delivery. I met a couple whose well was contaminated by salt, and with the State found at fault, had two new wells drilled: both of which were found to have emerging salt contamination. For each one of these examples, there are hundreds more across the state who discovered their dishwasher and washing machine fixtures were prematurely rusting, that their health is declining with hypertension or chronic disease, and that their cars are depreciating more quickly than ever before, all because of salt runoff from state roadways.

The longer this issue has been allowed to persist, the more upstate communities like ours feel they don't matter to those with the power to make change, that their wellbeing is worth less than the fear of frivolous lawsuits from legal teams. Yes, road salt pollution is a multifaceted issue – economic, social, and ecological - but it is also an environmental justice issue: concentrating burdens of the many on the backs of the few, the rural, the impoverished New Yorkers with the least ability to pay and who live in the oldest homes in closest proximity to state highways. But it doesn't end there. When plumbing pipes and fixtures corrode in older homes containing lead, that lead more readily dissolves or flakes into the water that flows from the faucet. Residents can't see, smell, or taste lead, and even water that runs clear can contain it. The public health impact could well be staggering if lead leaching is as pervasive as we fear, not unlike the water crisis in Flint, Michigan.

**AdkAction and our partners have proven more sustainable, cost saving winter road maintenance measures work, and the Department of Transportation should be empowered to scale these methods:**

We recognize there lies the ability for great change in the Department of Transportation, if only its leadership and chain of command are given the directive for action and the support needed to enact it. AdkAction and our collaborators take a pragmatic approach to problems, and we have already piloted fiscally responsible interventions in winter road maintenance that are ready for the Department of Transportation to bring to scale. Since 2022, we have advanced a robust regional strategy for road salt reduction through the Clean Water Safe Roads Network. This technical network helps 26+ North Country town and county highway departments reduce their use of road salt and sand by up 50%, by empowering highway superintendents and their crews operator best management practices training, 1-1 technical assistance training, and opportunities for shared problem solving. We have seen practical, safe salt reduction taking place across the Adirondack Park over the past three winters while reducing costs, controlling for safety, and maintaining operator take-home pay.

By switching from a traditional salt/sand mixture to pre-treating roads with salt brine which melts snow and ice on contact, transitioning from conventional plow blades to segmented “live edge” plows which more effectively prevent the bond of material to road, less salt is required to meet our expected level of winter road maintenance. Coupled with an elimination of sand, our participating departments have yielded substantial cost savings and a roughly 50% chloride reduction, to the satisfaction of their residents.

As crews have embraced these ideas, culture changes and momentum builds. Highway departments across the Park report that salt reduction initiatives bring their team together in new ways, while better serving their constituents with a higher level of service through each storm. By engaging the very people who are often rendered invisible: the plow operators who work when most of us sleep, quietly keeping

our towns and villages functioning; we elevate their expertise and their role in solutions. We build their pride and ours. I believe our State must do the same.

Governor Hochul's state operations budget proposal for fiscal year 2025-26 includes **\$156,524,000** for the Department of Transportation to spend on supplies and materials (an increase of nearly \$6 million from the former FY '24 proposal), "For the payment of costs of snow and ice control on state highways and preventive maintenance on state roads and bridges as defined in paragraph (a) of subdivision 1 of section 10-d of the highway law." (FY '25 State Operations Budget S.3000/A.3000). However, we know there is waste in the system as salt bounces and scatters off the road, achieving nothing but pollution. **Given the financial challenges we face this budget cycle as New Yorkers, now is the moment to use your voices to call for bold action on road salt reduction, so that we use only what we need, we reduce waste, we reduce the hidden tax and very real health consequences imposed on vulnerable New Yorkers.**

**It's time for change. Implementing the Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report recommendations doesn't cost a thing.**

While these are comments related to the proposed budget, the most important change has a price tag of \$0. For an agency that must be concerned with the "triple bottom line" of social, environmental, and economic profits, road salt reduction opportunities represent not just a win-win-win, but an affordability imperative. With the support of our legislators and Governor, the DoT can reach an initial 20% reduction in salt use funded simply through material spending reductions in a single winter. Those savings can be reinvested into the department if given the opportunity to be entrepreneurial, initiating alternative practices and utilizing more technically advanced equipment for brining and plowing. In doing so, a 50% reduction of road salt use and the attendant road salt pollution can be achieved.

The State's Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report released in 2023 provides a top-tier assessment of the scope and scale of road salt pollution impacts in the Adirondack Park region, as well as a menu of options road managers can take to reduce road salt pollution while maintaining safe roadways. **These strategies must be implemented, rather than continuing to languish on a shelf. Why are we waiting to protect our clean water?**

As someone who has seen nearly three dozen New York towns and counties implement reductions without cost burden and roadway safety comprised, I can tell you that significant reductions can be achieved through the implementation of the seven primary task force recommendations:

1. Scale up well-known snow and ice removal practices that reduce overall salt use while maintaining current levels of service for the driving public;
2. Establish and carry out uniform best management practice training for winter road managers statewide, and consider advancing legislation to limit liability for road managers when best management practices are followed.
3. Adopt water quality standards for chloride and sodium, and implement road salt reduction targets;
4. Expand existing funding for salt reduction programs and implement a "return on investment" approach to scale up the deployment of modern low-salt equipment;
5. Track salt applications at state, local and private levels, collect a robust water quality data set, and

make data on its use publicly accessible;

6. Establish a process for remediating the contamination of residential drinking water.

7. Create an outreach and awareness campaign to strengthen public understanding of salt use and its risks to the environment and human health.

Though not included in the final version of the 2023 report, a number of task force members, along with a coalition of salt reduction advocates, recommend that the state implement the following measures at the same time, and we have accessory legislation in progress to do just that:

**Establish a framework for accountability:** (1) Pass legislation establishing a statewide interagency council and advisory committee, following the model set forth by the New York State Invasive Species Council and Advisory Committee, to serve as a dedicated body guiding the implementation of the Task Force Report’s recommendations. (2) Create a dedicated “salt czar” staff position in the Governor’s office to lend support and accountability for the Council, DOT and partnering agencies, for such an interconnected and complex issue.

**Develop an Action and Implementation Plan for Report recommendations:** For the next six years, there are immediate and sustained long-term efforts that will be necessary to make progress implementing Task Force recommendations. Currently, no timeline exists for the fulfillment of report recommendations, including salt-reduction targets. The earliest phases of the road salt reduction pilots are now underway, but at the same time, a broader and more robust plan for future seasons must be developed in the next eleven months in preparation for the next winter season (2026-2027). This kind of effective, pragmatic planning takes time and must begin soon.

**Fund Salt Reductions Using Savings:** Salt is a very expensive product, and salt use reductions will alleviate pressures on state and local budgets while reducing pollution.

The Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report offers a path for the state Department of Transportation to take in reducing road salt pollution statewide, though we know the only real solution is a world without road salt. In the long road needed to reach that destination, we can start by enabling the State to save millions of dollars in the years to come through continuous improvement salt reduction steps. The Clean Water, Safe Roads model can be scaled to meet the needs of the traveling public across our state if we decide to build our success and put our dollars where our values are.

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