



**Department of
Environmental
Conservation**

KATHY HOCHUL
Governor

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Commissioner

**Testimony of
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New York State Department of Environmental Conservation**

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**Hearing on
The 2026-2027 Executive Budget Recommendations for the
Department of Environmental Conservation**

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Good morning, Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, Chair Harckham, Chair Glick, and distinguished members of the Legislature, I am Amanda Lefton, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). I appreciate this opportunity to discuss Governor Kathy Hochul's environmental priorities for the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 proposed State Budget.

This is my first budget testimony as DEC Commissioner, though I have been fortunate to work with many of you throughout the past 10 months. I look forward to building upon the remarkable progress achieved in that short time, and helping lead the robust environmental agenda detailed in Governor Hochul's 2026 State of the State agenda and Executive Budget.

The Governor's strong and sustained environmental commitment is more important now than ever before. The chaos created by the Trump Administration's sledgehammer approach to governance is erasing decades of clean air and water quality advancements, threatening public health and the rule of law, and putting New Yorkers, our environment, and our economy at risk. There is open hostility towards the regulations, research, and resources that are improving communities and feigned ignorance of the significance of refusing to measure pollutants and even removing considerations on the value of human lives in federal decision making.

And yet, I remain hopeful because, here in New York, we are championing clean air and water, renewable energy, green jobs, flood protection, pollution reduction, equity, and affordability. The Trump Administration's efforts stand in stark contrast to Governor Hochul's legacy of accomplishments and recognition that economic growth complements, not competes with, environmental protection. The Governor's forward-looking State of the State and Executive Budget proposals will further ensure New York continues prioritizing the investments and actions needed to confront the federal retreat on climate resilience, environmental justice, natural resources, and public health.

Reflecting on 2025, I am grateful for the Governor's leadership and the ongoing opportunities to collaborate with the State Legislature and our many other public and private partners in serving New Yorkers. The resulting highlights are many, and we continue to leverage their success as we move forward to advance our priorities.

In the last year alone, DEC commemorated wins across a broad range of program areas:

Bond Act

DEC allocated \$2.06 billion or 49% of Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act funds to date. Projects supported across multiple agencies include the Manhattan Greenway Project in Harlem, the Adirondack Rail Trail, flood prevention projects in the Southern Tier and lower Hudson Valley, the Ralph Wilson Centennial Park Coastal Shoreline Project (Go Bills!), Sojourner Truth State Park improvements, fish hatchery modernization, safety and accessibility at Peekamoose Blue Hole, salt marsh restoration at Cupsogue Beach in Suffolk County, dozens of clean water infrastructure upgrades, and zero-emission school buses in communities across the state, just to name a few.

Conservation

DEC modernized the use of title insurance to expedite land acquisitions, was granted the authority to independently acquire conservation easements, and reduced the financial hurdles faced by not-for-profit organizations in their land conservation efforts. These changes will benefit multiple programs.

DEC launched a new Open Space Conservation Grant program empowering local governments, not-for-profit organizations, and Indian Nations to protect open space and bolster climate resilience.

DEC rolled out the Freshwater Wetlands Law revisions to protect the countless benefits these ecosystems provide to people and fish and wildlife. DEC also worked closely with stakeholders to issue a variety of general permits for covered activities such as housing, solar development, utility rights-of-way, among others, with specific conditions that are protective of wetland habitat and water quality.

Pollution Reduction and Remediation

Last year's budget reauthorized the State Superfund Program for 10 years and included an increase to \$1.25 billion. This investment is helping accelerate the cleanup of contaminated sites such as the future High Falls State Park in Rochester.

DEC advanced a suite of significant new actions and resources to protect, educate, and assist New York communities in addressing the threat of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination, including data collection from wastewater treatment plants, sampling of PFAS in biosolids, and completion of the rural background study to inform regulation of PFAS cleanups statewide.

Clean Water

New York disbursed \$3.8 billion during State Fiscal Year 2025 in financial assistance in cooperation with the State Environmental Facilities Corporation, Departments of Health and Agriculture and Markets, and others for local water infrastructure projects. This more than 50 percent increase in year-to-year funding is making crucial projects affordable for New Yorkers and empowering local communities to undertake critical drinking water and sewer projects.

Climate

Governor Hochul launched the \$1 billion Sustainable Future Program, which is the largest single climate investment in state history, dedicating funds to decarbonize facilities across New York.

DEC released a new reporting rule for certain significant greenhouse gas emissions sources to help better inform the State's efforts to reduce pollution, deliver cleaner air, and improve community resilience. By understanding emission data, New York State can develop effective strategies that reduce harmful air pollution and direct key investments where they are most needed.

In 2025, New York collaborated with other states on updates to the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) which has cut power plant emissions by more than half while raising nearly \$3 billion for affordable, climate-smart investments since 2009. New proposed regulations would further strengthen RGGI to achieve affordable and effective reductions in climate pollutants.

Public Protection

DEC deployed Forest Rangers to fires in 10 different Western U.S. states, while also responding to more than 200 wildfires across New York, many of which were caused by debris burning and unattended campfires that spread more quickly during dry conditions. DEC also helped lead the State's drought prevention response and water conservation efforts after dry weather resulted in multiple regions entering drought warning status.

DEC coordinated a rapid multi-agency response effort at the Great Lakes Cheese spill affecting Ischua Creek. DEC's swift and effective enforcement helped mitigate long-term impacts on the creek. DEC will continue to guide the full restoration of this recreationally, ecologically, and culturally important waterbody. This case was one of hundreds of enforcement measures taken to hold polluters and others violating New York's environmental laws and regulations accountable to protect the State's air, water, habitat, and wildlife.

DEC completed investigations by Environmental Conservation Police Officers that resulted in more than 15,000 tickets or arrests for violations ranging from deer poaching to solid waste dumping, illegal mining, the illegal pet trade, and excessive emissions violations.

Sustainable Development

DEC helped advance sustainable economic development and the protection of Central New York's environment by working with Micron and the local community on permits and authorizations for freshwater wetlands, water quality, endangered and threatened species, and mitigation projects that will help create, restore, and enhance wetlands as the project continues to proceed. Ongoing efforts to increase collaboration with our State partners – ESD, HCR, DOS, NYSERDA, DPS/ORES – ensures we have the most timely, efficient, supportive, and thorough sustainable development processes in the nation.

Environmental Justice

DEC finalized Commissioner's Policy 79 to establish and maintain an inventory of DEC facilities in disadvantaged communities (DACs) for the purposes of reducing the impact of our operations and prioritizing DEC facilities in DACs for energy and environmentally efficient upgrades.

In 2025, DEC took important steps to carry out provisions of the Environmental Justice Siting Law, which will aid DEC's efforts to implement environmental and climate justice and protect DACs when new projects are sited.

DEC also released its largest-ever EJ grant at \$12.6 million for 11 environmental education centers, in addition to making \$4 million available to help youth in environmental justice areas and DACs obtain job skills to advance New York's green economy.

Waste Reduction

DEC supported Feeding New York State and the 10 regional food banks to increase participation in the State's nation-leading food donation and food scraps recycling program. A record 63 million pounds of food was collected and redirected from landfills since the program's launch, which has helped feed hungry New Yorkers and reduce emissions that contribute to climate change.

This work was made possible by welcoming 400 new staff who bolstered a dedicated team of professionals hard at work across the state to uphold DEC's environmental mission. The success of targeted recruitment efforts and NY HELPS brings the total to nearly 800 new staff in the last two years alone, critically replacing almost a quarter of the agency.

This year, we will continue to build on our progress. The Governor laid out a clear vision for DEC in 2026 with an Executive Budget that will successfully carry DEC and our mission forward.

Governor Hochul is engaging a whole-of-government approach to ensure State agencies are coordinating resources and assisting local partners in successfully advancing projects, obtaining grants and other crucial assistance, and building stronger, healthier, more affordable communities.

Governor Hochul is making a transformational investment of \$3.75 billion over five years to ensure substantial funding is available for communities to continue building sewers and infrastructure, including projects for housing, tackling lead service lines, and preventing PFAS in drinking water. The total investment builds upon \$6 billion allocated for clean water infrastructure since 2017 and will help keep infusing successful programs, such as DEC's Water Quality Improvement Project grants, with funding to help municipalities complete essential projects and keep local costs down.

The Executive Budget also advances emissions reductions from transportation with a bill to remove the cap on rebates for charging infrastructure projects and clean vehicle purchases for DEC's Municipal Zero Emissions Vehicles Program. Removing the cap on these rebates will help fund larger infrastructure projects and incentivize the purchase of more clean vehicles, including medium-duty and heavy-duty vehicles, by municipalities across the state.

The Governor proposed modernizing the State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) Act, first passed in the 1970s, to achieve our multiple goals of affordable housing and environmental protection. The SEQR proposal reduces administrative steps while maintaining municipal control over local zoning requirements and upholding environmental standards of all other State and local permits. The proposed changes help advance critically important projects such as zoned and permitted housing up to a certain size, clean water infrastructure, parks, trails, and childcare facilities. The approach encourages sustainable growth — one of my top priorities as Commissioner — by incentivizing development on previously disturbed sites and in places where there are existing sewer and water hook-ups, to avoid impacts to greenspaces. This will result in air and water quality improvements, greenhouse gas emissions reductions,

and wildlife habitat preservation when compared to policies that encourage sprawl and unchecked development of natural areas.

In line with the SEQR reforms and the ongoing efforts to enhance our permitting processes, the Governor is directing DEC to launch the new “Smart Access” online platform. With support from investments in the Executive Budget, Smart Access will create a single portal into DEC’s permitting process and help permittees and other entities better understand environmental reviews in real time and access the latest documents to further streamline access and improve transparency.

Recognizing the unique challenges of housing and economic development in rural communities, the Governor is proposing a constitutional amendment to return Camp Gabriels, Moriah Shock, and Mount McGregor correctional facilities to productive use. The proposal will also secure a win for conservation by permanently protecting open space within the Forest Preserve. In addition, \$50 million from the proposed \$750 million annual clean water investment is targeted to help more rural communities, which often have unique fiscal barriers to accessing water funding, improve water quality infrastructure, secure State funding, and support economic growth.

The Executive Budget also continues Governor Hochul’s commitment to providing DEC and our partners with the resources needed to protect crucial fish and wildlife habitat, enhance natural resources, make communities healthier, and enhance access to the outdoors. Once again, the Governor proposes to continue the record funding level for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). This \$425 million supports a variety of initiatives protecting our forests and farmland; investing in open space; improving water quality; mitigating flooding, extreme heat and other climate impacts; reducing waste; and promoting environmental justice in communities most vulnerable to pollution and climate impacts.

DEC will be working closely with other State and federal partners with \$668 million in the Executive Budget for crucial coastal resiliency and infrastructure. Several new programs to mitigate costly climate damage and bolster resiliency include the Resilient and Adaptive Communities Program, the Adaptation and Resilience Network, and Community Resiliency Hubs that will connect communities with emergency response resources. We are excited to also launch the FloodSafe NY initiative to enhance the understanding and management of floods with new data that helps DEC collaborate towards solutions that anticipate and mitigate flood risks.

These efforts will be complemented with more funding available through the Green Resiliency and Coastal Resiliency grant programs and \$1 million to help implement the New York State Adaptation and Resilience Plan to connect communities with the design, engineering, and other expertise needed to move municipal projects forward. Local governments are in critical need of these services, particularly disadvantaged communities, to ensure successful implementation of projects that apply for and receive Bond Act resiliency funds.

Enhanced efforts to address harmful pollution affecting New York’s drinking water and habitat include new regulations that treat landfill leachate at the source, helping save taxpayers millions in future cleanup costs. The increased investments in clean water infrastructure from the

Executive Budget provides indispensable funding to local governments to help comply with the new requirements. A \$5 million increase in DEC's Inactive Landfill Monitoring Initiative, for a total of \$10 million, would further help identify new potential sources of contamination from closed landfills.

The Governor is providing a \$5 million increase for DEC to accelerate plugging abandoned oil and gas wells to reduce pollutants and ensure public safety. This increased \$5.5 million program will go directly towards building upon an already successful program that is plugging toxic fossil fuel wells to help reduce ongoing risks to drinking water, public health, and the environment.

Most parents and mental health professionals recognize the value of the Governor's ongoing "Get Offline, Get Outside" campaign that encourages New Yorkers to get off social media and enjoy the outdoors. The Executive Budget provides new resources to help DEC support an expansion of accessible and safe spaces to play and learn. The new "Cooler Schoolyards" climate initiative supports nature-based playground investments that increase shade, prevent extreme heat from hot asphalt, and serve as cooling anchors for neighborhoods. This year's State of the State also launches DEC's expansion of accessible features specifically for children with disabilities through the "These Lands are for Everyone" initiative to provide more opportunities for people of all abilities to connect with nature.

The Governor's commitment to the above initiatives is further underscored by the additional resources and staffing to help DEC's new and existing responsibilities succeed, especially to meet our permitting responsibilities. The Executive Budget recommends 45 new full time staff positions, for a total staffing level of 3,407. DEC's State Operations Budget also received an increase of \$4.4 million to more than \$650 million from all funding sources.

DEC is restoring habitats and bolstering climate resilience to protect communities from flooding, heat, and other harmful impacts. We are bringing nature back to communities and also encouraging economic development, reducing pollution, revitalizing neighborhoods and enhancing recreational opportunities for all New Yorkers.

As we look ahead, DEC will continue to push back on federal actions that seek to strip away New York's legal right to implement environmental laws and initiatives. This week alone, DEC asserted our water quality protection authority and our state rights by opposing a petition filed by Constitution Pipeline with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, and right now, DEC's General Counsel is testifying before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to oppose sweeping federal regulatory changes to vital clean water protections.

During comment periods, in the courts, and in our communities, we are not backing down because New Yorkers deserve clean air and clean water and value our critical natural resources. DEC will continue to advance strong environmental protections for today and for future generations.

Under the Governor's leadership, New York State and the Department of Environmental Conservation will continue to take the reins to protect our environment and public health, support equity and inclusivity, invest in our communities, advance sustainable development, and rebuild trust in government.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide today's testimony. I look forward to continuing to collaborate throughout the 2026 Legislative Session.