



ADIRONDACK
COUNCIL PRESERVING WATER,
AIR AND WILDLANDS

**Testimony of the Adirondack Council at the
Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the Environmental Conservation
Portion of the Executive Budget Proposal for Fiscal Year 2026-2027**

January 28th, 2026

Good afternoon, Chair Harckham, Chair Glick, Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, and honored legislators. My name is Andrew Williams, and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Adirondack Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this public hearing.

For 50 years, the Adirondack Council has been the largest environmental advocacy group working solely to protect the ecological integrity and wild character of the six-million-acre Adirondack Park and broader North Country region. Based in Elizabethtown, NY (30 miles east of Lake Placid), The Adirondack Council's mission is to **ensure the ecological integrity and wild character of New York's six-million-acre Adirondack Park for current and future generations**, envisioning clean air and water, large wilderness areas, working farms, and thriving communities, achieved through science, law, and advocacy. We focus on protecting wild places, clean air and water, and supporting sustainable communities, using education, advocacy, and legal action. To protect the Adirondacks, the Council uses the best available science to guide regional decision-making and a deep knowledge of the political landscape in Albany and the North Country to educate, inform, and motivate the public and those who make public policy. The Council believes wild places are a powerful connector for visitors and residents alike and help make the iconic Park a national treasure, now and for future generations.

The Adirondack Council is a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organization, and we do not accept any state grants.

We offer the following testimony in response to the Governor's Executive Budget proposal for the 2026-2027 fiscal year.

About the Adirondack Park

The Adirondack Park is a national treasure, and we have it right here in upstate New York. The Adirondack Park contains one of the largest intact temperate forests left in the world and is home to approximately 130,000 year-round residents. With over 2,800 lakes and ponds and

1,500 miles of rivers fed by an estimated 30,000 miles of brooks and streams, the Adirondacks are an important source of clean water. Its large wilderness landscapes are a refuge for wildlife, people, and a powerful tool in sequestering greenhouse gases.

The Adirondack Park is a patchwork of public and private lands, with slightly more than half in private ownership and the remainder in ‘forever wild’ Forest Preserve lands protected by our state’s constitution. The protection of millions of acres of state land is something New Yorkers must never take for granted. The Adirondack Park Agency (APA), led by an eleven-member board, provides oversight of the administration of the Forest Preserve, and is also responsible for long-range planning of private lands in the park. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is tasked with the care and custody of our Forest Preserve and protection for those who use these lands for hunting, fishing, respite, and recreation. With roughly 130,000 year-round residents in more than 100 communities, the Park is a source of business and culture: arts, craft making, sports, hunting and fishing, farming, forestry, and other entrepreneurial efforts merge with the Park’s spectacular setting to create a place that is truly special.

Ensuring the Adirondacks benefit all New Yorkers

Every single New Yorker is a co-owner and co-protector of the “forever wild” forest preserve and, through our state constitution, is entrusted with every decision made regarding the public lands within the Adirondack Park. New York’s Executive Law §801 has established a vested interest for all New Yorkers in preserving a park-like aesthetic across both public and private lands in the Adirondacks.

As one of the largest intact temperate forests left in the world, the Adirondacks will play a prominent role in achieving the state’s ambitious “30 x 30” goal. Natural climate solutions are an essential piece of the puzzle for New York to achieve climate justice. **Highly populated regions of our state face the specter of severe flooding and storm impacts if we do not successfully address climate chaos. Large forested regions, the biggest of which are found in the Adirondacks, will retain water and absorb greenhouse gases.** This will slow climate change and associated impacts if we take the necessary steps to protect and leverage these important assets.

There are many opportunities to act this year in the interest of fostering diversity, equity, inclusivity and justice for all to benefit from the Adirondacks. There are also important opportunities this year for the Adirondacks to aid our state’s efforts to combat climate change.

Some progress has been made, but we urge the legislature to keep working to preserve the Adirondack Park and ensure it benefits all New Yorkers.

Fighting Climate Change and Protecting Clean Air and Clean Water for Disadvantaged Communities

Water quality data collected in the Adirondack Park has played a critical role in protecting the lungs of residents living in frontline communities for decades. That data has also aided in the development of groundbreaking clean air policies and court actions against upwind polluters across state lines. This has resulted in greater protection against acid rain, smog, ozone, and greenhouse gases. New York has been a national leader underscoring the crucial linkages between strong scientific data collection and the role this data plays in fighting climate change, but more funding is needed. **The Adirondack Park is the ideal location for this work because its protections and distance from point-source pollution creates a controlled environment that allows researchers to isolate air pollution and climate impacts in ways other regions of this state and country cannot.**

A consortium of non-profit partners and top academic institutions in New York State has come together to design a multi-year, 21st-century water-quality survey that has great potential to guide climate policy on the global stage, just as the Adirondack lakes survey of the 1980's did in the fight against acid rain. This project is known as a Survey of Climate and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems (SCALE). Among many things, this study will examine carbon and methane cycling, storage potential and prediction methods for freshwater. Researchers will also examine how climate change impacts baseline conditions of waterbodies, including temperature, dissolved oxygen, and the duration/ length of seasonal stratification. Scientists will explore the relationships among climate change, harmful algal blooms, food web attributes, cold-water fisheries, and mercury bioaccumulation.

The SCALE consortium uses cutting-edge research techniques, including eDNA collection/analysis, remote sensing, fluorescence, and more. This data is expected to benefit state agencies in the development of future climate and fisheries policymaking and to provide critical information to guide strategic investment in greenhouse gas reduction and climate resiliency initiatives.

Governor Hochul and the legislature funded this survey with an initial \$500,000 in the FY 22-23 budget, which allowed researchers to pilot the SCALE project in 2023. Data from the pilot study has been summarized and will aid in refining the larger study of roughly 300 waterbodies. Governor Hochul and the legislature funded this survey with an additional \$2 million in the FY23-24 budget, \$2 million in the FY24-25 budget, and \$2 million in the FY25-26 budget. The

SCALE project has enough funding to collect the data, but lacks sufficient funding to analyze the data. Data analysis is where we will reap the reward of this globally significant research effort. This project is estimated to cost \$12 million to complete, meaning that New York's investments have gotten us to the halfway mark. Governor Hochul has proposed to fund SCALE at up to \$1 million dollars this year. While we applaud the Governor for proposing funding for SCALE in her Executive Budget, this does not go far enough.

Please stand up for climate science, build off of Governor Hochul's proposal, and increase the FY27 appropriation to \$2 million for the Ausable Freshwater Center, Cornell CALS, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and academic partners to conduct a Survey of Climate Change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems (SCALE).

The Timbuctoo Institute

The fight for climate, environmental, and social justice requires that, as we combat global warming, we better connect the Adirondack Park with communities on the frontlines of climate change across the state. We celebrate that New York's Adirondack Park was a cradle of the early fight for Black suffrage. In that same spirit of opportunity, the Timbuctoo Institute introduces high school students to a broad spectrum of green job opportunities, fostering the next generation of environmental stewards and climate advocates. The early years of this program have been a great success, with SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers hosting over 130 students from the five boroughs in 2025. The program sees an opportunity to grow in the coming year, while working within its existing budget framework. We encourage you to fund the Timbuctoo Institute at \$2.1 million once again this year.

Governor Hochul has again proposed funding the Timbuctoo Institute in her FY 26-27 Executive Budget at \$2.1 million. The Adirondack Council urges the legislature to support a fully funded systemic partnership between the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers College, with funding coming from both the EPF and SUNY budget.

Visitation to the Adirondack Park has grown dramatically, with more than 12 million visitors each year, the vast majority recreating on the state's "forever wild" Forest Preserve. While this popularity reflects the Park's immense value—particularly as New Yorkers increasingly seek outdoor recreation for physical and mental health—it has also intensified pressures on natural resources, visitor safety, and the wilderness experience. Overuse has exposed longstanding challenges, including limited public transportation and inequitable access, underscoring the need for thoughtful, modern management.

The State has begun to respond by implementing recommendations from the DEC's High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group, including trailhead educators, summit stewards, improved sanitation, safer parking management, and limited shuttle service. In addition, funding for a Visitor Use Management Framework (VUMF) in the High Peaks and Kaaterskill Clove represents an important step toward adaptive, data-driven recreation management. However, growing use of waterways and other areas of the Park demands a broader approach. We urge the Legislature and Governor Hochul to dedicate \$1 million for a long-overdue carrying capacity study to guide safe boating, shoreline protection, and aquatic habitat conservation, and to increase funding for Adirondack and Catskill Wilderness Stewardship and Visitor Safety to \$10 million. Finally, as the State works to restore wilderness character and manage overuse, these efforts must remain consistent with ecological protection and equity goals; while expanding access for people with disabilities is essential, it should be achieved using existing authorities without introducing motorized uses into the Park's most ecologically sensitive Wilderness, Canoe, and Primitive lands.

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI) aims to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment across the Adirondack region. Additionally, ADI works to ensure the region remains relevant and supported by an increasingly diverse population in New York State and the nation. ADI provides important anti-bias training services to the NYS Rangers and Environmental Conservation Officers, and would like to grow that program. ADI benefited from a \$420,000 appropriation in the Aid-to-Localities last year. Currently, its impact far exceeds reasonable expectations for any entity operating with a grant of this size. **The Governor proposed to maintain the ADI funding at \$420,000 in her Executive Budget this year. The Adirondack Council supports ADI's request to increase the Governor's proposal to an allocation of \$840,000 in this year's budget, in response to the growing impact and reach of this highly effective program.**

Environmental Protection Fund

For more than 30 years, the [Environmental Protection Fund \(EPF\)](#) has served as the cornerstone of the environmental portion of the capital projects budget. The Adirondack Park was the poster child for the creation of the EPF, with images of Adirondack waters and wildlands compelling state policymakers to act more than three decades ago. Governor Hochul has proposed to keep the EPF at \$425 million this year. **The Adirondack Council urges the**

legislature to support this and continue to grow the EPF, with a long-term goal of \$500 million in future budgets.

The Adirondack Council believes the Environmental Protection Fund should include, at a minimum, the following:

- **\$50 million for Open Space Protection, with \$3 million for the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) Conservation Partnership Program and \$1.5 million for the LTA Conservation Easement Program [Executive proposed \$42 million]**
- **\$20 million for Invasive Species Management [Executive proposed \$18.5 million]**
- **\$10 million for Adirondack Wilderness Protection & Visitor Safety [Executive proposed \$8 million]**
- **\$1 million for Adirondack Visitor Centers (ADK High Peaks, Catskill Center, Paul Smiths VIC, SUNY College of Environmental Science & Forestry VIC) [Executive proposed \$750,000]**
- **\$2 million for a Survey of Climate & Adirondack Lakes Ecosystems (SCALE) [Executive proposed \$1 million]**
- **\$1 million for a carrying capacity study of Adirondack waterbodies [Executive proposed \$0]**

Preserving Clean Water and Promoting Community Vibrancy

The Adirondack Park has aging clean water infrastructure, including wastewater treatment plants, sewer lines, and household septic systems, that threaten our lakes, rivers, and streams and whose impacts are far-reaching, from closed beaches to impaired trout streams to harmful algal blooms and contaminated drinking water wells. Adirondack rural communities host large seasonal influxes of visitors, including vacation rentals that stress these aging systems further, especially impacting the waters of the Adirondacks. Investments in water infrastructure constitute one of the most pivotal investments the state can make to protect Adirondack waters while promoting the underpinning of sustainable businesses and affordable housing in Adirondack Park hamlets.

In the course of the past decade, New York State has invested more than \$200 million in grants from the Clean Water Fund for a host of clean water infrastructure projects in communities across the Adirondack Park region, leveraging nearly \$400 millions in total clean water capital project investment. While great strides have been made, from Lake George to Lake Placid, much more needs to be done particularly in the Western Adirondacks. The current backlog of wastewater and sewer system needs within the Adirondack Park, noted by the New York State Environmental Facilities Corps (NYSEFC) report, is well over \$200 million. **We appreciate the Governor's inclusion of \$500 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act (CWIA), with an**

additional \$250 million for housing-related water infrastructure, of which \$50 million is designated specifically for rural communities. This investment will help not only our statewide needs but also to make sure adequate dollars are available for these critical needs in the Adirondack region.

Septic System pollution has also contributed to harmful algal blooms in at least twenty water bodies in the Adirondack Park in the past three years. The vast majority of wastewater controls surrounding these water bodies are decentralized and managed through homeowners' septic systems. In 2024, the NYSDEC expanded the eligibility of the Septic System Replacement Fund from a dozen to over a hundred water bodies to help address this issue and provide rural homeowners with up to \$10,000 in remediation grants. However, to truly address this challenge, much greater investment is needed for the State Septic System Replacement Fund to assist residents who have septic systems on Adirondack Lakes.

For example, Hamilton County received around \$400,000 for this program in 2025, funding 38 replacement projects, but their need is higher, and they have a backlog of over 60 applications. Another example is the Lake George septic system inspection program (23% needed repairs, 17% were substandard, and 18% failed); several million dollars will be needed for the county alone in 2026. **This story unfolds across the park, and the FY27 budget must have increased funds for the Septic System Replacement Fund.**

The Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report Recommendations: The Time for Action is Now!

The release of the Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report in September 2023 marked an important step toward addressing the growing impacts of road salt pollution on water quality, ecosystems, and drinking water. While focused on the Adirondack Park, the report outlines practical, proven strategies that can be applied statewide to significantly reduce salt use while maintaining roadway safety. Although there is no single substitute for road salt, meaningful reductions are achievable through improved winter maintenance practices, standardized training and liability protections for road managers, adoption of chloride and sodium water quality standards, expanded investment in modern low-salt equipment, improved tracking and transparency of salt use, remediation of contaminated drinking water, and increased public education.

To ensure these recommendations lead to real and lasting change, advocates urge the State to pair the report's findings with clear accountability and implementation. This includes establishing a dedicated interagency council and advisory committee to guide and oversee

progress, developing a concrete action plan with timelines and reduction targets, and reinvesting savings from reduced salt use into further pollution prevention efforts. Additionally, legislation is needed to curtail the overuse of road salt in practice. Road salt is heavily overused at great cost to the state and municipalities. This is a rare opportunity to save taxpayer dollars, protect public health, and maintain safe roadways. Taken together, these steps would protect public health and water resources, reduce long-term costs, and move New York toward a more sustainable and responsible approach to winter road management.

Proposed Constitutional Amendment on Decommissioned Correctional Facilities

Protecting New York's Forest Preserve while supporting the vitality of Adirondack communities requires solutions that honor both our constitutional values and present-day realities. This amendment recognizes the give-and-take by allowing the limited conveyance of long-decommissioned, highly developed correctional facilities that no longer serve a public purpose, while delivering a clear and measurable net gain to the Forest Preserve. In exchange for the transfer of approximately 153 acres of developed lands at Camp Gabriels, Moriah Shock, and Mount McGregor, the State would permanently protect at least 1,500 acres of land in the Adirondack Park that the Legislature determines to be of equal or greater value.

This proposal recognizes that these former facilities impose ongoing fiscal and environmental burdens on the State and surrounding communities, while remaining largely unusable in their current state. By conditioning any conveyance on legislative approval and the acquisition of significantly more Forest Preserve acreage, the amendment strengthens long-term conservation outcomes while creating space for local economic, housing, and environmental benefits. It is a pragmatic, conservation-forward approach that reflects the spirit of Article XIV, supports host communities, and ensures that New York emerges with more protected wild lands, not less.

Supporting Lake Associations and the Stewardship of New York's Waters

Protecting New York's lakes and ponds is essential to safeguarding clean drinking water, resilient ecosystems, and the quality of life that anchors communities across the state. As climate change increases the frequency of harmful algal blooms, fuels the spread of invasive species, and adds new stressors to freshwater systems, lake associations have emerged as frontline partners in monitoring, prevention, and community education. These locally based organizations connect state policy with on-the-ground action, translating science into practical solutions that protect both public health and natural resources. Increasing capacity dollars, similar to the very effective NYS Conservation Partnership Program, would allow qualified NY lake associations to advance riparian corridor protection, economic development, responsible lakeshore development, combat invasive species spread, and promote responsible recreation and tourism.

Supporting lake associations provides a cost-effective, community-driven response to the growing threats facing New York's water bodies. With modest, stable resources, these organizations can expand early detection and rapid response efforts for invasive species,

support reduction strategies that curb algal blooms, and engage residents and visitors in stewardship practices that reduce long-term impacts. Supporting lake associations is an investment in clean water, local economies, and climate resilience, ensuring that New York's waters remain healthy, accessible, and productive for generations to come.

Thank you again for your time today and for considering our testimony. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions:

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