



Testimony of the Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute
2026 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing: Environmental Conservation/Energy
January 28, 2026

Good afternoon Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, Chair Harckham, Chair Glick, and esteemed committee members and legislators. My name is Maureen Cunningham, Executive Director of the Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute.

Paul Smith's College is the only four-year college located within the Adirondack Park, with a mission to prepare career-ready graduates while advancing research and education that supports an ecologically and economically sustainable Adirondack region. The **Adirondack Watershed Institute** is a program of the college, with a team of 20 scientists, researchers, stewards, and educators, supported by more than 150 seasonal staff, working with lake associations, communities, and residents to protect the region's lakes and watersheds.

Today, I respectfully submit two requests for inclusion in your one-house budget bills:

1. Maintain \$200,000 for the Adirondack Watershed Institute's Forest Preserve research and monitoring; and
2. Maintain \$250,000 for the Paul Smith's College Visitor Interpretive Center.

Request 1: Maintain \$200,000 for the Adirondack Watershed Institute

Thanks to your support last year, the Environmental Protection Fund provided \$200,000 for the Adirondack Watershed Institute (AWI) for scientific research and monitoring in the Forest Preserve. We ask that you continue this commitment at the same level in this year's budget to sustain our state-certified laboratory and long-term water quality monitoring.

AWI operates the only laboratory in the Adirondack Park certified by the New York State Department of Health Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program. That certification underpins credible water quality data and research that local governments, state agencies, and communities rely on to make informed, science-based decisions.

AWI also maintains the largest long-term water quality dataset in the Adirondacks, built over 30 years, covering over eighty lakes and supported by over 100 community volunteers. This record is what allows us to detect low-level changes in highly sensitive lakes, identify early warning signs, and ultimately prevent these waters from crossing ecological tipping points.

Our research on the impacts of road salt helped document contamination of drinking water wells and surface waters and contributed to the creation of the Adirondack Road Salt Reduction Task Force, whose recommendations stress that long-term monitoring cannot lapse. If this work is interrupted, irreplaceable data needed to protect clean water for communities and ecosystems will be lost.

At the same time, harmful algal blooms are spreading more rapidly across New York as the climate warms, threatening public health, recreation, and drinking water supplies. AWI's certified lab and expert staff give the Adirondacks the capacity to analyze the chemical, biological, and physical drivers of these blooms. With demand quickly outpacing our current capacity and equipment, we will need to invest even more in the future.

The Adirondack Park is a headwaters region feeding the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence, Lake Champlain, Mohawk River, and Hudson River watersheds, so what happens to water quality here directly affects millions of New Yorkers downstream. Continued Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) support at \$200,000 sustains the scientific infrastructure that protects these shared waters.

Request 2: Maintain \$250,000 for Paul Smith's College Visitor Interpretive Center

The Paul Smith's College Visitor Interpretive Center (VIC) is a 3,000-acre, year-round outdoor education and recreation facility with 25 miles of trails serving youth, residents, and visitors. Last year's EPF support of \$250,000 for Forest Preserve visitor centers, including the Paul Smith's VIC, was essential to keep these facilities open, safe, and accessible.

The VIC depends heavily on private fundraising and program revenue, and state support is the stabilizing piece that keeps doors open, trails maintained, and environmental education programs running. We respectfully request that you retain the EPF line for the Paul Smith's College VIC and the other Forest Preserve visitor centers in this year's one-house budgets.

The VIC also serves as a powerful multiplier for the Adirondack Watershed Institute's work by translating cutting-edge watershed science into public and environmental education for more than 40,000 visitors each year, expanding the reach and impact of state investments in clean water and healthy lakes.

In closing, thank you for your leadership in protecting New York's natural resources and for your past support through the Environmental Protection Fund. On behalf of Paul Smith's College and the Adirondack Watershed Institute, I respectfully ask you to maintain \$200,000 for Forest Preserve research and monitoring for the Adirondack Watershed Institute and \$250,000 for the Paul Smith's College Visitor Interpretive Center. The returns on this investment are cleaner lakes, healthier watersheds, and expanded environmental education and outdoor access that strengthen Adirondack communities and safeguard waters that are vital to all New Yorkers.

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