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Action for our region's environment.

Environmental Conservation Committees Joint Hearing, FY2027 Budget Save the Sound Testimony

January 24, 2026

Senators and Assemblymembers,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I appreciate the invitation to address this joint budget hearing of the Environmental Conservation committees and to share our priorities with you. Some of those priorities are unique to the Long Island Sound region, but most of our goals are universal and would protect clean water and communities across all of New York State.

I'm here today as the Vice President of the Center for Water Protection and the New York policy lead for Save the Sound, a bi-state environmental action organization working to protect Long Island Sound and its rivers, fight climate change, save endangered lands, and work with nature to restore ecosystems. I would like to address the mounting challenges that threaten all New York communities, but particularly the Long Island Sound region.

Before I started this job, I spent nearly 30 years practicing corporate law, during which time there was a phrase I encountered all the time.

"Time is of the essence."

It was common for lawyers to include that phrase in contracts as a notice to all parties of the need for a timely completion of a transaction. Either we do the deal now or it's not going to happen.

When it comes to modernizing clean water infrastructure in the state of New York and protecting our natural resources, time is of the essence.

We know that our wastewater, stormwater, and drinking water infrastructure in New York needs about \$90 billion worth of upgrades. Every year that goes by, that infrastructure continues to age and degrade and become increasingly inadequate to handle the demands individuals, families, businesses, and entire communities depend on them to meet.

Every year, the challenge facing our outdated infrastructure is further compounded by the increased impacts of extreme weather resulting from climate change.

Every year pollution is allowed to continue, more plastic waste and microplastics enter our waterways and litter our communities. PFAS and other toxic chemicals find their way into our drinking water and our bodies, posing a range of dangerous threats to public health, and then into our rivers, the ocean, and Long Island Sound, causing harm to aquatic life.

And every year, the cost of addressing the problem goes up. It's more expensive to build a new sewage treatment plant today than it was 10 years ago, and it'll cost more in the future. The cost of removing PFAS from our water cycle in the future will be greater than it would cost today to stop these "forever chemicals" from getting into our lives in the first place.



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The longer we wait to fix these infrastructural problems, the more the opportunity cost and material cost will continue to escalate. We cannot afford to wait.

The notion of affordability was prominently featured in Governor Hochul's State of the State address and reflected in the decisions that shaped her executive budget for FY2027. We thank the Governor for prioritizing her commitment to clean water infrastructure, specifically \$500 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act and \$425 million for the Environmental Protection Fund. In a budget year burdened by so much uncertainty and so many difficult choices, it is encouraging that the Governor chose to keep our investment in those critical sources of environmental funding at the same historic levels as they are today. This commitment acknowledges how fundamental clean water is to New Yorkers, and that we cannot wait any longer to fund expansion and modernization of our clean water infrastructure.

Through our work in the Long Island Sound region, we see the need for this vital funding.

Last year, we released our 2025 Long Island Sound Beach Report, providing science- and data-driven grades for water quality at more than 200 public and private beaches around the Sound. One hundred twenty-five of those beaches were in New York; 70.4% of those received A or B grades, while 29.6% got Cs or Ds.

Between 2022-2024, water samples collected by local health departments at beaches in Nassau and Suffolk County failed to meet state-established safe swimming criteria more than 10% of the time under wet weather conditions, which occur when a quarter-inch of rain or more was recorded in the 48 hours prior to sample collection. Our report groups beaches in Westchester County, the Bronx, and Queens together; collectively, wet weather samples at those beaches in the western Sound failed 20.8% of the time during that same three-year period.

These failure rates are the result of failing infrastructure and worsening climate change.

Long Island Sound is an economic engine, contributing billions of dollars every year to the communities that surround it. Lost beach days mean lost business for restaurants, hotels, and everyone that depends on beaches staying open and residents and visitors using them. We need to protect water quality at our beaches, as well as in our bays and harbors (later this year, we'll be issuing our 2026 Long Island Sound Report Card, which evaluates the ecological health of the open Sound and its bays and harbors; we'll be sharing that with legislators from around our region.)

We must protect clean water in the Long Island Sound region. Time is of the essence.

The good news is we know the solution to these challenges: increased investment in our clean water infrastructure.

Every day, we see the need for the kind of investment provided by the Clean Water Infrastructure Act and the Environmental Protection Fund. We see how these grants empower communities to pursue long-overdue upgrades to wastewater treatment and stormwater management, as well as projects to keep PFAS, plastics, and other contaminants out of our waterways and drinking water, restore habitat, and enhance resiliency.



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We know first-hand the kind of work these programs support. For example, earlier this month, Governor Hochul announced more than \$200 million in Water Quality Improvement Project grants to support 131 projects across the state. One of those projects will enable Save the Sound to remove a dam on the Bronx River in Westchester County that will reconnect 15 miles of habitat. The investment made over the years by the Governor and this Legislature will restore critical estuary habitat and improve flood resiliency. We thank you for supporting these important projects.

Our clean water infrastructure has long-outlived its capacity to handle the scale of the climate-fueled challenges we face in 2026. It is critical that New York's investment match the magnitude of the problem in order to ensure the continued recovery of Long Island Sound and to protect clean water across the state, all of which is vulnerable to the degrading effects of climate change.

We urge the Legislature to support at least \$500 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act and at least \$425 million for the Environmental Protection Fund in the state budget for FY2027.

Additionally, we urge the Legislature to put forth a budget that invests:

- \$1 billion for the Sustainable Future Program, to continue New York's critical transition away from fossil fuels;
- \$340 million in capital projects for New York State Parks;
- \$90 million for capital projects managed by the Department of Environmental Conservation;
- Continued transparent implementation of the \$4.2 billion Environmental Bond Act, and that the state meets or exceeds the mandate to spend at least 35 percent of the Bond Act money in designated disadvantaged communities;
- \$96,323 to the Interstate Environmental Commission, as required by the Tri-State Compact, allowing the IEC to qualify for federal matching funds; and
- At least the same staff funding as last year for the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Department of Health, and the Environmental Facilities Corporation, to ensure the agencies that safeguard our state's environment have the capacity to carry out their mandates.

We request that the Legislature also include two bills in the budget that will both protect clean water and generate revenue for the state. The **Bigger Better Bottle Bill** (S5684 May/A6543 Glick) would increase the returnable container deposit from 5 cents to 10 cents, the first increase since the program's inception in 1982, expand the types of beverage containers covered by the program, and raise the redemption fee from 3.5 cents to 6.5 cents. These adjustments would incentivize the collection and proper recycling of disposable beverage containers, leading to less pollution in our waters and on our streets, and it would also provide a raise to the people struggling to operate redemption centers and make a living off collecting containers. A 2019 report estimated that between 4,000 and 8,000 "canners" are active in New York City alone. Expanding the bottle bill will also generate an estimated \$100 million in new revenue, since the state receives 80% of unredeemed deposit fees.

With climate change causing more harm to our water resources each year and fossil fuel companies bringing in record profits, it is inexcusable that New York subsidizes the industry with taxpayer money to the tune of \$1.8 billion a year. The **Stop Climate Polluter Handouts Act** (S3606A Krueger/A3675A Simon) would save the state \$350 million a year by ending subsidies for some of the most polluting fuels, but



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would preserve subsidies that could impact consumer prices, such as those for home heating and car fuel.

At Save the Sound, we know these policies and investments would help protect Long Island Sound. But we also know they would support waterbodies across the state, as well as all New Yorkers who fish, swim, and paddle in them and the communities and businesses that depend on clean water every day.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

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Save the Sound

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