



FOLLOWPA

FINGER LAKES - LAKE ONTARIO WATERSHED PROTECTION ALLIANCE

**New York State Senate and New York State Assembly
Environmental Conservation Committee
SFY 2026-27 Budget Hearing**

Testimony by the Finger Lakes – Lake Ontario Watershed Protection Alliance
Submitted on January 23, 2026
By Kristy LaManche, Program Coordinator

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of the Finger Lakes – Lake Ontario Watershed Protection Alliance (FOLLOWPA). FOLLOWPA is an alliance of 25 New York State counties within the Lake Ontario drainage basin that promotes grassroots programs to protect water resources with participation from numerous agencies and organizations, local governments and individual landowners to control nonpoint sources of pollution, eradicate invasive species, conduct watershed monitoring, and educate and engage the public. FOLLOWPA programs address identified needs as defined in county water quality strategies, comprehensive watershed management plans, state and federal plans, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Priority Waterbody Inventory. The Alliance facilitates the transfer of information, techniques, and resources among the 25 counties so water quality problems can be managed more effectively at the watershed level, despite crosscutting political boundaries and agency jurisdictions.

FOLLOWPA would like to thank the New York State Legislature for your foresight in enacting the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) over thirty years ago, and for your historical commitment to ensuring critical programs within the EPF are funded year after year. The EPF has provided a dedicated source of funding for projects and programs that protect and improve water quality, protect air quality, conserve critical open space and farmland, and sustain important environmental education for our next generation of leaders. The EPF also helps to support the economy and protect the health and safety of New Yorkers.

Since 1997, FOLLOWPA has been included in the EPF under the Open Space Program Category. Over 95% of our annual appropriation is distributed to 25 member counties for program implementation. FOLLOWPA partners leverage, on average, \$2 for every \$1 appropriated to them in the EPF. FOLLOWPA funds are often used as the catalyst to get projects started or to move a project from the planning/design phase to implementation. The stakeholders that have participated in FOLLOWPA sponsored projects are very appreciative of this financial assistance and have helped promote the program to their colleagues throughout the Basin.

The Governor has proposed keeping the EPF at \$425 million for SFY 2026-27 with no sweeps or offloads. She has also proposed FLOWPA's funding remain at \$3.5 million. We are grateful to the Governor and the Legislature for continuing to recognize the importance of the EPF and FLOWPA especially during these challenging financial times.

We'd like to remind the members of the Senate and Assembly Environmental Conservation Committees that our initial request for SFY 2026-27 was \$5 million, as was our request for SFY 2025-26. Each year, our membership carefully reviews their program needs and projected expenditures. For the past several years, many FLOWPA partners have struggled to retain well-trained staff; while others have realized that the last FLOWPA program increase (SFY 2024-25) is simply not enough to adequately address local water quality concerns. **The demand for FLOWPA assistance across the Finger Lakes – Lake Ontario drainage basin exceeds the amount of available funding due to emerging environmental concerns, harmful algal blooms, devastating flooding events that impact water quality and threaten public drinking water supplies, and the rising cost of supplies and materials needed to implement the FLOWPA program.**

Clean, available freshwater is essential to a high quality of life. The people that live and work in the Finger Lakes-Lake Ontario region benefit immeasurably from the 260 lakes and more than 16,200 stream miles that distinguish the landscape. These resources provide water supplies for drinking, industry, and agriculture. They support exceptional recreational opportunities and scenic vistas – enhancing the quality of life and making upstate New York more desirable to new businesses and tourists. FLOWPA has always demonstrated the ability to efficiently and effectively utilize our State appropriation and continues to be an asset to the New York State and the Department of Environmental Conservation. EPF funding helps FLOWPA and its partners make our communities desirable for businesses, residents and tourists alike by implementing programs that conserve clean water; support jobs; improve community parks and waterfronts; and position our municipalities to become more resilient and reduce risk from storm impacts.

The Trust for Public Lands reported that “For every dollar spent by the State’s Environmental Protection Fund to acquire or protect land, \$7 in economic benefits are returned through natural goods and services, such as filtering air and water of pollutants, and flood control. Activities benefitting from the EPF – including outdoor recreation, forest-related manufacturing and logging, farming, and recycling – account for more than 350,000 jobs in New York State and billions of dollars in spending.” The report also stated that “EPF-supported industries add \$40 billion to the state’s economy every year.”

Clean lakes are major revenue generators attracting tourists to the area and generating property tax revenue for municipalities. While the economic value of our waters is evident, their intrinsic value is not easily quantified. Now, more than ever, New Yorkers are understanding the value of clean lakes, fresh air, and green spaces as they seek safe, open spaces to live and recreate. The COVID-19 pandemic has made everyone appreciate New York’s abundant natural resources so much more and has encouraged them to do their part to protect these resources for future generations.

On behalf of FLOWPA, I respectfully submit this testimony today and ask that you fund the SFY 2026-27 EPF at no less than \$425 million with no offloads and sweeps and FLOWPA at no less than \$3.5 million so that we can continue to preserve and protect New York’s freshwater resources by developing and implementing comprehensive, basin-wide programs that promote

public education and citizen involvement and the sharing of information and techniques among watershed partners – FLOWPA's greatest strength and attribute. If additional funds are made available in this year's budget, we would suggest increasing the EPF to \$500 million and FLOWPA's appropriation to \$5 million. We hope that New York State will be in a better financial position in SFY 2027-28 and that you will increase the EPF to \$500 million and our appropriation to \$5 million so that FLOWPA members can partner with municipalities, stakeholders, lake associations, and farmers to expand programs to preserve and protect New York's freshwater resources and implement environmental programs that create jobs, economic opportunity, and create more resilient communities and ecosystems.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony and for your careful consideration of this request.