



22 November 2024

Governor Kathy Hochul
 Executive Chamber
 Capitol Building
 Albany, NY, 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,
The Catskill and Adirondack Parks collectively represent one **quarter of New York State’s land mass**. The Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves **are the lungs of New York, a great force to combat climate change**, providing oxygen, filtering water, cooling streams, lakes, and lands by affording shade, and sequestering climate-altering carbon. They protect wildlands and water, preserve mature forests and habitat, and provide **fresh drinking water to millions** of New Yorkers. **With over 2,000 miles of recreational trails**, they offer access for health and well-being and support local and state economies.

Thank you for your leadership and support in providing \$10 million in dedicated funds for the Catskill and Adirondack Parks in last year’s State Land Stewardship category of the **Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)**.

Thank you also for your support last year for Adirondack and Catskill **visitor centers, science facilities, research, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion** initiatives, including accessibility.

We urge you to include the following programs in your FY25-26 Executive Budget proposal:

- **\$500 million for the Environmental Protection Fund**

- the **\$12 million dedicated Forest Preserve funding** line in the EPF under state land stewardship with a focus on trail monitoring, maintenance and rebuilding; visitor information; accessibility and DEI; and transportation and parking solutions.
- DEC's **Adventure NY capital projects funding at \$100 mil** with a goal to double current funding
- **DEC staff increases of 225 FTEs**, including in the Divisions of Lands and Forests and Operations
- Visitor Centers and Educational Stewards
- Science Facilities, Research, and Monitoring
- DEIA initiatives
- Accelerated land acquisition processes to meet conservation and climate goals
- Smart Growth programs
- Connect Kids program
- PTNY Grants
- Historic sites, including Camp Santanoni and Fire Towers

Retain Dedicated Stewardship Funding in the EPF, Invest in Trails

The dedicated funding line in the EPF for the Catskills and Adirondacks is critical for protecting wilderness, providing safe and welcoming visitor experiences, and supporting communities. Studies show that the Forest Preserve and its wilderness experiences, such as hiking, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing, help sustain regional economies and private property values in the Adirondacks and Catskills. **Continued funding is essential** to implement the vision outlined by the Catskill Strategic Planning Advisory Group (CAG) and the Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group (HPAG) to address high use of popular areas in the Forest Preserve and the communities that surround them. **The dedicated funding for the Forest Preserve has been a huge boost** for stewardship projects **but with thousands of miles of trails in need of maintenance and repair** and many state land units not yet developed for public access, **it is simply scratching the surface of this need.**

Increase DEC Capital Funding and Staff

The need for capital projects in the Forest Preserve is huge, but DEC gets only \$90 million for 4.5 million acres of managed public lands and conservation easements across the state. **DEC's capital funding should be increased significantly** to have parity with the funding available to the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), which has over twice the funding available for capital projects for about 400,000 acres. To move funding to projects in a timely manner, processes geared toward efficiency and streamlining within DEC and other agencies and offices who administer grants, contracts and acquisitions should be implemented immediately. Staffing increases are needed in the Division of Lands and Forests and in the Division of Operations. We appreciate the increase in DEC staff made in recent years, however a large portion of the increased staffing went towards implementing new programs related to the Bond Act and state climate goals. There is a need for strategic staff additions to DEC. We urge the addition of approximately 225 new FTEs throughout different divisions and offices within DEC to enable efficient program implementation.

Thank you for hearing the call to **support the New York State Forest Ranger force**. The Forest Ranger force is a critical piece of Forest Preserve recreation infrastructure. In maintaining the recruitment and retention of Rangers, we also ask that you recognize these crucial members of the New York State Police Forces by signing their pension parity legislation that provides a uniform 20-year pension for all New York State Police forces.

The **Adirondack Park Agency is tasked with long-range planning for 20% of the state of New York**. It is a model for planning agencies across the country and the world. We request that you continue to assist the agency in filling open positions to **bring them back up to a fully staffed level.**

Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Accessibility (DEIA)

It is essential to support programs and opportunities in Park communities that will build capacity in **DEIA**, such as the work of the **Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI)**, the **Timbuctoo Summer Climate and Careers Institute**, the **SUNY ESF Center for Native Peoples and the Environment**, **Paul Smith's**

John Dillon Park, and the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report** led by the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC) and the Open Space Institute (OSI).

Dedicated stewardship funding is also needed to **continue support for accessibility** in the Adirondacks and Catskills. Appropriately located accessible and sustainable trail infrastructure that protects natural resources, and provides opportunities for all visitors whether they be families, new recreators, or individuals with mobility challenges. **We applaud the creation of the Accessible Recreation Destinations map** to provide comprehensive and accurate information for the public. **We also applaud DEC for the creation of the new office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Civil Rights which unites accessibility with civil rights and DEI issues.** We urge DEC to **develop a comprehensive accessibility policy** to guide and promote accessibility and inclusivity on its managed lands statewide, including the Forest Preserve.

Invest in Adirondack and Catskill Park Communities

Park Towns and Villages are integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Parks that **need infrastructure support for quality of residential life, and for safe and enjoyable visitor experiences that help support regional economies.** In the Adirondacks, the Common Ground Alliance (CGA) and the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages (AATV), and in the Catskills, the Catskill Park Coalition (CPC), meet annually to collaborate and develop priorities on whole park issues that include the needs of communities within the park as well as recreation and ecological concerns. **Smart Growth Grants** and other EPF funding should be increased and coupled with other investments such as Bond Act funding to update infrastructure in Park communities. Funding should support clean water, road salt reduction, affordable and achievable housing, improving connectivity, community development, scenic byways, and infrastructure and transportation projects such as **shuttles and “hamlets as hubs” that support Adirondack and Catskill Trail Towns. A shuttle system must be revisited** and a more robust and integrated shuttle plan for areas of the Forest Preserve seeing heavy traffic must be implemented.

Funding should also be retained for **Historic sites** that draw thousands of visitors to communities each year **such as Camp Santanoni**, and the network of historic fire towers and Park sites with friends’ groups who are funded by **Parks and Trails NY EPF stewardship grants.**

We also urge you to work with the State Legislature to formulate a constitutional amendment that allows the closed correctional facilities on the Forest Preserve to be redeveloped or repurposed so that they can provide a public benefit for the communities where these facilities are located.

Continue Support for Visitor Centers

Visitor centers currently address stewardship and promote communities in the Forest Preserve Parks. These include the Catskills Visitor Center in Mount Tremper, the Paul Smith’s Visitor Interpretive Center, the ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb, the High Peaks Information Center and Cascade Welcome Center in North Elba. These facilities are strategically located and attract visitors traveling to popular areas. **Continued funding of these strategic centers**, which rely heavily on private fundraising, **is critical as they serve to protect the Forest Preserve, keep recreators safe**, educate youth and the public, **and highlight community assets.** Visitor Centers should also be priorities for siting car charging stations.

Continue Support for Educational Stewards

Educational Steward programs in the Adirondacks and Catskills are vital and augment the work of the visitor centers. Trained staff at busy trailheads welcome and inform visitors about how to stay safe by being prepared with the right gear and skills, and how to behave to protect the Forest Preserve and the experience of others on the trail.

Continued Support for Visitor Use Management, Research and Monitoring

Continued support for VUM planning and implementation is also an ongoing need, such as the projects currently funded for the Adirondack High Peaks and Kaaterskill Clove in the Catskills. Other popular areas desperately need VUM planning, such as the many lakes and ponds of the Adirondacks which are popular recreational destinations and have not been studied to determine their carrying capacity even though this has

been mandated by the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan. **Funding for VUM studies of lake complexes, including carrying capacity analyses, should be designated for the Adirondack Park Agency** for these unique plans which will cover both public and private lands and waters. The APA has planning jurisdiction over public and private lands which makes it the ideal agency to administer and facilitate VUM studies for waterbodies in the Adirondack Park.

Research and monitoring, which are called for in both the HPAG and CAG reports, are essential to inform management actions, evaluate the health of the Forest Preserves and to implement the VUM. Several facilities and projects in the Adirondacks and Catskills specialize in monitoring of biodiversity, air and water quality, and climate resilience including, The Adirondack Watershed Institute (**AWI**), The Atmospheric Sciences Research Center (**ASRC**) Whiteface Mountain Field Station, and **Cary** Institute of Ecosystem Studies, and the *Survey of Climate Change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems (SCALE)*, and its project partners. These facilities track pollutants in air and water, monitor weather, disseminate data, and run essential programs like the **Catskill Science Collaborative**. **Please support these and other projects to monitor trail and recreation infrastructure** condition, and please continue to support funding to combat Invasive Species. It is imperative to get invasive species education and information to those on the ground who can take action such as landowners. Fast-tracking EPF funding for biocontrol research such as the work done by Cornell in collaboration with the NY Invasive Species Research Institute is needed.

Accelerate Land Acquisition to Meet Conservation and Climate Goals

At a time when the future of the planet depends on protecting open space, land protection should be one of NY State's highest priorities. NYS land acquisition has slowed down to a trickle. In the 2000s – 2010s, DEC and OPRHP were purchasing an average of 70,000 acres (fee and easement) annually. **In 2020 this dropped to 6,005 acres and DEC only purchased 4,416 acres in 2022. Currently NYS Land Trusts have purchased and are holding over 96,000 acres of land** that NY State asked them to buy with a fair market value of over \$150 million. Most of this acreage is in the Forest Preserves. NY Land Trusts' "holds" are longer than 5 years; in the past this hold period averaged two years. This severely reduces land trusts' ability to protect open spaces. The backlog has become so acute that legislation was proposed last year to bring New York's acquisition process in line with the practices used by the federal government. **Fixing this issue is the only way that New York will meet its climate and 30x30 goals. Another way to help reach the State's goals is a program that protects privately owned forests for carbon sequestration and carbon storage purposes.**

Thank you for your work and leadership in caring for the great State of New York and the Catskill and Adirondack Parks and the Forest Preserve. We appreciate your attention to these important requests.

Sincerely,

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