



6 November 2023

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

Dear Governor Hochul,
The Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks collectively represent over 6.5 million acres of land or nearly **a quarter of New York State**. This incredible resource serves all New Yorkers by protecting public wildlands, water, and providing recreational access for health and well-being, supporting local and state tourism and economies, and preserving intact mature forests and habitat. The Adirondack and Catskill regions are home to 200,000 residents and serve over 25 million visitors annually. In our current climate crisis, **the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks serve as the lungs of New York, a great force to combat climate change** as its forests provide oxygen and sequester carbon. They protect critical habitat, and provide **fresh drinking water to millions**, including those in New York City.

The undersigned groups are **appreciative of the historic commitment** to the \$400 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), and passage and roll-out of the \$4.2 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act—Thank you! These are exciting accomplishments that benefit the whole state. We are also grateful for the boost in agency staff last year for the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to help implement the Bond Act and the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act.

Thank you for your leadership specifically in supporting the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks by providing **\$8 million in dedicated funds** the past two years within the nearly \$50 million of State Land Stewardship funding in the EPF. Projects are now being implemented with this funding including the expansion of trail work, more educational stewards, improvements to recreation infrastructure (e.g., trailheads, parking, and water access), projects to improve inclusivity and accessibility, and Visitor Use Management (VUM) planning and implementation.

The dedicated funding line in the EPF for the Catskills and Adirondacks is an impressive step toward meeting the vision outlined by the Catskill Strategic Planning Advisory Group (CAG) and the Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group (HPAG), to **protect wilderness, provide safe and welcoming visitor experiences, and to invest in Catskill and Adirondack communities**. We must continue our progress toward this shared vision and **urge you in FY 24-25 to support the following:**

- **Stewardship**

- **Retain dedicated stewardship funding** in the EPF for the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks as an annual appropriation of \$10 million under State Land Stewardship.
- **Continued support for Forest Preserve Visitor Centers** in the EPF.
- **Support research and monitoring** of climate change, pollution, and other causes of environmental stress in the Adirondacks and Catskills.
- **Develop an accessibility policy** for DEC-managed lands.
- **Clear the backlog of land conservancy acreage** under agreement for public land acquisition to meet New York State climate goals.

- **Sustainability**

- **Invest in Adirondack and Catskill communities** through support of Bond Act projects, Smart Growth initiatives, and DEI initiatives; and through promoting affordable housing, cellular and broadband connectivity, and special Adirondack ambulance districts.
- **Continue to add and support agency staff** and promote streamlining and reforms to make hiring and retaining agency staff more efficient.

Stewardship

Retain Dedicated Stewardship Funding in the EPF and Include Trails as Bondable Investments

Stewardship funding for recreational infrastructure supports Adirondack and Catskill communities. Studies show that the Forest Preserve and its wilderness experiences, such as hiking, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing, help sustain regional economies and property values in the Adirondacks and Catskills. **Unfortunately, Bond Act funding will not cover stewardship needs** funded by the dedicated Forest Preserve line, such as education and the eligibility of trails as bondable in New York State is currently uncertain. Given the durability of trails, however, and the need for higher trail standards to enhance access, protect natural resources, and improve stewardship, we urge the state to include trail building and trail maintenance as appropriate and essential uses of Bond Act funds. Other states like California can provide examples of bonding for trails. This is especially time sensitive as the Long Path, another premier long-distance trail, approaches the milestone of being the first trail to directly connect New York City and both Forest Preserves along a single route. The upcoming 100th anniversary of the 120-mile Northville-Placid trail this year is a testament to trail durability. **The maintenance of existing trails, the greatest need, is even more unlikely to receive Bond Act funding.**

The projects supported by the Catskill and Adirondack dedicated funding line in the EPF are not one and done projects, but ongoing needs. Trails must be maintained and improved annually. Educational stewards are needed every year to help visitors have safe experiences. Building capacity in **Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Justice (DEIJ)** initiatives in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks will require annual investments such as by implementing the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report** led by the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC) and the Open Space Institute (OSI).

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 Lake George Wild Forest, which is one of the most complex and heavily used land units in the Forest Preserve, and in the Catskills, the currently trailless high peaks are seeing natural resource degradation due to increased visitation.

Dedicated stewardship funding is also needed to **continue support for accessibility** in the Adirondacks and Catskills. Accessible and sustainable trail infrastructure provides opportunities for all visitors whether they be families, new recreators, or individuals with mobility challenges. Efforts to create new trail experiences for a wider range of people should be considered through the lens of accessibility. **To promote access for all we urge DEC to develop a comprehensive accessibility policy** to guide land managers in promoting accessibility for its managed lands statewide, including the Forest Preserve. Implementing an accessibility policy as part of DEC's overall Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative will create synergy with the State effort to promote inclusivity in access to state lands for all people.

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 Mt. Tremper, the Paul Smith's Visitor Interpretive Center, the ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb, the High Peaks Information Center at the Heart Lake Program 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**.

Support Research and Monitoring of Environmental Stress and Ecological Vital Signs

Sustained monitoring of the ecological vital signs of the Forest Preserve is imperative to protect the health and integrity of New York State's treasured Adirondack and Catskill parks. Tracking these ecological indicators - biodiversity, air and water quality, and climate resilience - is essential for the well-being of the people and lands of the state of New York. Several facilities in the Adirondacks and Catskills specialize in monitoring ecological vital signs including, **The Adirondack Watershed Institute (AWI), The Atmospheric Sciences Research Center (ASRC) Whiteface Mountain Field Station, and Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies**. These facilities track pollutants in air and water, monitor weather, disseminate data to other researchers and the public, and provide inclusive opportunities for interns and research fellows.

Research that informs management actions is called for in both the HPAG and CAG reports, as well as in the Adirondack Vision 2050 Report. For example, carrying capacity studies like the one proposed for **the Saranac Lake Complex in the Adirondacks** are necessary to protect aquatic habitats. Increased support of Cary Institutes' **Catskill Science Collaborative** is also essential as is **continued support to combat invasive species** by supporting the Forest Preserve PRISMs, including **The Nature Conservancy's** Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program (APIPP), and the **Catskill Center's** Catskill Regional Invasive Species Partnership (CRISP), and projects that partner with them such as Cornell's **NYS Hemlock Initiative** to combat Hemlock Woolly Adelgid. And to understand the extent of climate change impacts on Adirondack lakes—habitat quality, climate sensitive species distributions, carbon accounting, and harmful algae blooms—and guide science-based management for decades to come, supporting the consortium-based Survey of Climate Change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems or **SCALE**, **and project partners such as the Ausable River Association, is essential to the future of water quality** throughout New York State.

Fix Land Conservancy Acreage Backlog to Meet Climate Goals

At a time when the future of the planet depends on protecting open space, land protection should be one of NYS' 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. The majority 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. The backlog, and the burden on land trusts whose ability to protect open space has been severely impacted, has become so acute that legislation was proposed last year to bring New York's acquisition process in line with the streamlined efficient practices used by the federal government and other states. Clearly, fixing this issue is the only way that New York will meet its climate and 30x30 goals.

Sustainability

Invest in Adirondack and Catskill Park Communities

Healthy Parks require Healthy Communities. Unlike other state parks, Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks contain communities where people live, work, and raise families. These communities and their businesses are part of the fabric of the Parks, and they provide lodging, food, entertainment, and emergency services to park visitors. The **Park Towns and Villages** are integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks. As such they **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 Grant and other EPF funding should be increased and coupled with other investments such as Bond Act funding to update infrastructure in Forest Preserve Park communities. Funding should support clean water, affordable housing, and infrastructure projects such as trails, community development, and scenic byways. 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.** It is also essential to support programs and opportunities in Park communities that will build capacity in **DELJ**, such as the work of the **Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI)**, the **Timbuctoo Pipeline Summer Climate and Careers Institute**, the **SUNY ESF Center for Native Peoples and the Environment**, and the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report.** Supporting the establishment of special ambulance districts in the Adirondacks will improve emergency services for rural communities.

Promote Affordable Housing

The lack of affordable homes is a national crisis. However, in tourism destinations such as the Adirondacks and Catskills housing availability becomes more complex due to the popularity of second homes, short-term rentals, availability of developable lands, and greater regulation. In times of crisis, many move to the Adirondacks and Catskills to escape urban areas, putting even more pressure on available housing and increasing housing expense. Full-time residents, service workers, seasonal workers, recreational stewards, and civil servants are finding affordable living extremely difficult. The Adirondack CGA and AATV, Catskill Park Coalition, and the Adirondack Vision 2050 **call for initiatives promoting affordable and achievable housing**, including technical support for towns to revise their land use codes; careful expansion of hamlets tied to creating quality, affordable, and attainable housing; ensuring that planning and land-use regulation create incentives for construction of affordable and attainable housing; development of a land bank program to meet community housing needs; increasing opportunities for Smart Growth, the creation of a feasible Transfer of Development Rights program; and inclusion of individuals from the Adirondacks and Catskills in any task force, study group, and stakeholder organization developed by the state to address affordable housing needs.

Cellular and Broadband Connectivity

We applaud the Governor's broadband initiative. It is essential that connectivity efforts plan for both broadband and cellular together, using tools like open-access middle-mile fiber to fill the gaps for both. Our rural Parks, who cater to millions of visitors annually, must have these critical services, as people's lives depend on it. Significant gaps in cellular and broadband coverage in the Adirondacks and Catskills create not only health and safety risks, but also magnify limited economic and educational opportunities. We urge **the adoption and funding of recommendations of the New York Upstate Cellular Coverage Task Force** to encourage private sector investment in cellular infrastructure through regulatory reforms and, where appropriate, economic incentives.

Add and Support Agency Staff

Projects cannot be implemented without staff. While we understand the current hiring challenges, we urge focusing on critical positions and exploring ways to streamline and support the hiring and retention of staff, and to create more efficiency and flexibility within the system. **We are especially concerned about insufficient staffing levels in the Division of Lands and Forests.** In 1996, there were 186 staff responsible for managing a total of 3,818,983 acres of public land. Today there are 170 staff who are responsible for 4,950,000 acres of public land and conservation easements. Also, during this time, three critical new programs were added: 1) climate change; 2) invasive species; and 3) conservation easements.

Simultaneously, recreational use has doubled. **Acres and workload are up, and staff is down;** staff numbers in the Division of Lands and Forests should be increased. Also adding staff in the Division of Operations would **support the 55 state public campgrounds** in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks, and **increase DEC's dedicated trail crews. DEC should also add seasonal recreational facilities coordinators** to ensure timely completion of workplans and other project elements, and to better coordinate with volunteers.

Staff support for the DEC Accessibility Program is also needed to develop and implement a comprehensive accessibility policy with robust trainings, technical consultations and field assessments with land managers, public outreach, maintenance of accessibility information for the public, and ADA-transition planning which helps with the removal of physical barriers that prevent program accessibility for people with disabilities.

Thank you for hearing the call to **support the New York State Forest Ranger force** with their own Ranger Academy and 40 slots for new recruits in 2022. The Forest Ranger force is a critical piece of Forest Preserve recreation infrastructure. When people get lost or injured on the Forest Preserve, the Forest Rangers are there to get them safely back home. We urge support for another **Forest Ranger academy in 2024** to stay ahead of attrition due to promotions and retirements. 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. In our current unpredictable climate where excessive heat and drought fuel wildfires, Forest Rangers are also New York State's **first line of defense against large destructive wildfires** that could decimate the Adirondack and Catskill Parks. Supporting the Forest Rangers in **this effort should be a part of a well-planned climate initiative.**

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.**

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

Sincerely,

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