



**Testimony of the Adirondack Council at the
Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the Environmental Conservation
Portion of the Executive Budget Proposal for Fiscal Year 2023-2024**

February 14, 2023

Good afternoon Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein and honored legislators. My name is Kevin Chlad, and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Adirondack Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at the public hearing today.

The Adirondack Council is a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park. We do not accept any government grants. We envision an Adirondack Park with clean air and water, large 'forever wild' wilderness areas, working forests and farms, and vibrant, safe, inclusive communities.

We offer the following testimony in response to the Governor's Executive Budget proposal for the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

About the Adirondack Park

The Adirondack Park is a national treasure, and we have it right here in upstate New York. **At 6.1 million acres, it is the largest park in the contiguous United States. The Park itself is ecologically significant in that it is the largest intact temperate deciduous forest in the entire world.** With over 2,800 lakes and ponds, and 1,500 miles of rivers that are fed by an estimated 30,000 miles of brooks and streams, the Adirondacks are an important source of clean water. It's large wilderness landscapes are a refuge for wildlife and a powerful tool in sequestering greenhouse gases.

The Park is a patchwork quilt of public and private lands, with slightly more than half in private ownership and the remainder consisting of 'forever wild' Forest Preserve lands, protected by our state's constitution. This is the strongest conservation law in the world, and something New Yorkers take great pride in. The Adirondack Park Agency (APA), led by an eleven-member board, provides oversight of the administration of the Forest Preserve, and is also responsible for long-range planning for the Park. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is tasked with the care and custody of our Forest Preserve and protection for those who use these lands for hunting, fishing, respite, and recreation. With roughly 130,000 year-round residents in more than 100 communities, the Park is a source of business

and culture as well: arts, craft making, sports, hunting and fishing, farming, forestry, and other entrepreneurial efforts merge with the Park's spectacular setting to create a place that is truly special.

Ensuring the Adirondacks benefit all New Yorkers

The Adirondack Park is a precious gift. We hope to pass it down to future generations in better condition than it stands today. There is strength in diversity. Thanks to our state's diversity, we reap the benefits of a broad and deep pool of talent, skill, and aspiration. The Adirondacks must welcome and nurture that diversity. In doing so, we honor the Adirondacks as national treasure that promises the ideal of "Forever Wild" for everyone.

Every single New Yorker is a co-owner and co-protector of the "forever wild" forest preserve, entrusted with every decision concerning parkland alienation through our state constitution. New York's Executive Law §801 has established a vested interest for all New Yorkers in preserving a park-like aesthetic across both public and private lands in the Adirondacks.

As the largest temperate deciduous forest in the world, the Adirondacks play a prominent role in achieving the state's newly codified "30 x 30" goal. Natural climate solutions are an essential piece of the puzzle for New York to achieve climate justice. **Highly populated regions of our state face the specter of severe flooding and storm impacts if we do not successfully combat climate change. Large forested regions, none bigger than the Adirondacks, will absorb water and greenhouse gases.** This will slow climate change and associated impacts if we take the necessary steps to leverage these important assets.

There are many opportunities to act this year in the interest of fostering diversity, equity, inclusivity and justice for all to benefit from the Adirondacks. There are also important opportunities this year for the Adirondacks to aid our state's efforts to combat climate change. Some progress has been made, but we urge the legislature to continue their efforts to reclaim the Adirondack Park and ensure that it benefits all New Yorkers.

Fighting Climate Change and Protecting Clean Air for Disadvantaged Communities

Water quality research in the Adirondack Park has played a critical role in protecting the lungs of residents living in frontline communities for decades. New York has relied upon the data collected by the Adirondack Lakes Survey Corp in this time, to develop groundbreaking clean air policies and act in court against upwind polluters. This has resulted in greater protections against acid rain, smog, ozone, and greenhouse gases. New York can invest in 21st century science that serves a similar role in fighting climate change.

In the 1980's, a federal clean air lawsuit settlement resulted in the funding of a comprehensive water quality survey of nearly 1500 Adirondack lakes and ponds. **The Adirondack Park is the ideal destination for this work because its protections and distance from point sources of pollution offer a controlled environment that allow researchers to isolate air pollution and climate impacts in a way that other regions of this state and country cannot.** The original three-year study established a baseline to guide the State's policymaking and recovery from acid rain and smog. Since then, the Adirondack Lakes Survey Corp (ALSC) has monitored a subset of these lakes and ponds like clockwork for nearly 40 years, establishing a world-renowned water quality data set that has served our state agencies and attorneys general in protecting public health. The SCALE proposal is additive to ongoing work, and not intended to supplant ongoing research.

The work of protecting clean air for all New Yorkers has long been rooted in the Adirondacks, where water quality monitoring has provided essential data in support of clean air regulations and successful litigation against those who pollute the air we breathe. This work must continue and grow to meet modern challenges, like climate change, road salt contamination, harmful algal blooms, and more. There is no time to waste.

A consortium of non-profit partners and top academic institutions in New York State have come together to design a \$6 million, 3-year, 21st century water quality survey that has great potential to guide climate policy just as the Adirondack lakes survey of the 1980's did for the fight against acid rain. Though this is not an exhaustive list, this study will examine carbon and methane cycling, storage potential and prediction methods for freshwater. Researchers will also examine how climate change impacts baseline conditions of waterbodies, including temperature, dissolved oxygen, and the duration/length of seasonal stratification. Scientists will explore the relationships between climate change and harmful algal blooms, food web attributes, cold water fisheries, and mercury bioaccumulation.

The consortium intends to use cutting edge research techniques such as eDNA collection/analysis, remote sensing, fluorescence and more. This data is expected to provide immense benefit to state agencies in the development of future climate policymaking, and provide critical information that will guide strategic investment of greenhouse gas reduction and climate resiliency initiatives.

Governor Hochul and the legislature funded this survey with an initial \$500,000 in the FY 22-23 budget and a plan for this first influx of funding has been assembled. The first installment of funding has leveraged the expertise, laboratories, and in-kind support from the Adirondack Lakes Survey Corp – a program of Ausable River Association, Cornell University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Syracuse University and CUNY.

This study will expand a world-renowned data collection effort of the last 40 years. The data will be publicly available and useful to researchers and policymakers around our state and nation. This is not science for the sake of the Adirondacks. This is science that will benefit public health in New York and beyond.

The Adirondack Council requests a *\$4M allocation for a Survey of Climate change and Adirondack Lakes Ecosystems (SCALE)* with \$3.5 million dedicated to NYS academic partners – Cornell CALS, RPI, Syracuse U., CUNY, Syracuse, and \$500,000 dedicated to the Adirondack Lakes Survey Corp at the Ausable River Association.

Protecting Wilderness while Fostering Equitable Access in the Adirondacks

More than 12 million visitors come to the Adirondack Park each year, marking a dramatic increase in use in the last decade. Most visitors will enjoy time on the state-owned “forever wild” Forest Preserve, hiking, boating, or one of many other recreational opportunities permitted on these lands. Even more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has led New Yorkers to seek safe experiences in the outdoors with their friends and family. While there is reason to celebrate the exceptional popularity of the Forest Preserve, there is also reason for concern.

Overuse of the “Forever Wild” forest preserve has led to widespread impacts to the natural resources, visitor safety, and the wilderness experience. Additionally, access to the Forest Preserve is essentially a privilege afforded to those who have access to private transportation. Public transportation is limited and largely non-existent. Park visitation is predominantly homogenous and demands further exploration into whether or not we have adequately fostered access opportunities for New Yorkers in the farthest-flung corners of our state.

The DEC’s High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group (HPAG) issued recommendations [in a 2021 report](#) to address the impacts of overuse for the High Peaks Region, the headwaters of the Hudson River. The state has implemented a selection of those recommendations. Recent completed actions include the deployment of trailhead and summit stewards and educators, additional porta john facilities, closing dangerously-located parking lots, and establishing a limited hiker shuttle.

Last year, New York State approved \$600,000 in the Environmental Protection Fund for a Visitor Use Management Framework (VUMF) for the High Peaks Region in the Adirondacks, and Kaaterskill Clove in the Catskills. The work is expected to begin soon, and holds promise to modernize the way our state manages all of its public lands in the future. The [VUMF](#) will use national experts to guide a state transition to adaptive recreation management, an iterative 21st century approach that sets land management goals, establishes “threshold indicators,” and ongoing data collection to drive decision making. The VUMF is already in use at all of our most popular national parks.

We must not wait for the first VUMF on the forest preserve to be tested before we embark in an effort to expand this work to other parts of the Park. The first VUMF will be tested in regions that offer a plethora of land-based recreational uses, but few-if-any aquatic recreational uses. **We urge the legislature to work with Governor Hochul to restore the dedicated line of \$600,000 in the EPF for a VUMF that focuses on a region hosting high levels of aquatic recreation.** Such an effort would aid the

state in developing strategies to enhance safe boating, protect shorelines from erosion, and safeguard sensitive aquatic species from avoidable encounters with the recreating public.

The FY 22-23 budget included \$8 million for Adirondack/Catskill Wilderness Stewardship and Visitor Safety. This funding promises to support trailhead educators who teach “Leave No Trace” ethics, trail repair projects, and pollution prevention. **We urge the legislature to work with Governor Hochul to restore this dedicated funding line in the Environmental Protection Fund this year, and grow its allocation to \$12 million.**

Lastly, as we work to restore the wilderness character of landscapes such as the High Peaks Wilderness, it is important to recognize that these efforts are entirely consistent with the goals of fostering equity in public lands access. **The current lack of adaptive recreation management (VUMF) acts against the values of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion, and results in a homogenous community of outdoor recreationists enjoying a privilege of access, rather than a right that should be afforded to all.**

Proactive visitor use management, done correctly, is our best hope to bring equity to public lands access and restore wilderness character (solitude, peace, tranquility) to Forest Preserve lands.

The Timbuctoo Climate and Careers Institute

The fight for climate and social justice demands that we better connect the Adirondack Park with communities disproportionately affected by climate change. We should celebrate that the Adirondack Park was a cradle of the early civil rights movement, dating back to the mid-1800s. [Timbuctoo](#) was the site of an early black suffrage settlement, one of eight known settlements in the Adirondacks that enabled 3000 black men to meet the property requirements granting them the right to vote in New York State. This history of opportunity at Timbuctoo should be uplifted, celebrated, and replicated in a modern Timbuctoo Pipeline. The Timbuctoo Pipeline will connect youth to opportunities at the intersection of climate science and green careers, preparing them for the threats and opportunities we face in the 21st century.

The Adirondack Council urges the legislature to accept the Governor’s proposal to provide \$2.1 million for a systemic partnership between the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers College with the goal of collaborating on the design, development, and hosting of an annual Climate and Careers Institute dedicated to providing an introduction to climate science, an exploration of intersectional careers, and addressing systemic issues of access to the Adirondack Park from an equity and justice perspective. This program would be comprised of an intersectional and interdisciplinary experience introducing mid-level high school students to the foundations of climate change science and an exploration with the environment. These careers start with the physical sciences but include everything from engineering to public policy and journalism to philosophy and ethics.

The FY 22-23 state budget approved a \$2.1 million appropriation for the first year of this program, which is set to commence in the summer of 2023.

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative

[Adirondack Diversity Initiative](#) (ADI) works to make the Adirondack region more welcoming to and inclusive of everyone. Additionally, ADI works to make the Adirondack region relevant to and supported by an increasingly diverse New York State and American population. ADI provides important anti-bias training services to the NYS Rangers and Environmental Conservation Officers, and would like to grow that program. ADI currently benefits from a \$300,000 sub-allocation in the Environmental Protection Fund. Currently, its impact far exceeds reasonable expectations for any entity operating with a grant of this size. **The Adirondack Council supports ADI's request to grow its allocation to \$400,000 in this year's budget, in response to the growing impact and reach of this highly effective program.**

Environmental Protection Fund

This year we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), the cornerstone of the environmental portion of the capital projects budget. The Adirondack Park was the poster child for the creation of the EPF, with images of Adirondack waters and wildlands compelling state policymakers to act three decades ago. Governor Hochul has proposed to keep the EPF at \$400 million this year, and use this fund to pay for operational expenses such as agency staff time. **The Adirondack Council opposes the Governor's budget language that allows any portion of the EPF to be used for staffing related expenses, as such language would greatly undermine the ability of this fund to leverage maximum conservation impact for the many communities it serves across the state.**

Governor Hochul proposed the following appropriations for these categories that are important to the Adirondacks:

- **\$37 million for open space protection with \$3 million for the Land Trust Alliance Conservation Partnership Program**
- **\$48.7 million for state land stewardship**
- **\$19.5 million for invasive species prevention and eradication, with \$900,000 for the Lake George Park Commission**
- **\$150,000 and \$225,000 for the Visitors Interpretive Centers at the SUNY School of Environmental Science and Forestry and Paul Smith's College**

We urge the legislature to support and grow these appropriations during budget negotiations.

Preserving Clean Water and Promoting Community Vibrancy

Recent years have brought much attention to the great needs our Adirondack Park has with [clean water infrastructure](#) and [septic system replacement](#). The impacts of failing wastewater systems and failing septic systems have been far-reaching – from closed beaches to impaired trout streams to harmful algal blooms. The challenges local Adirondack governments face to take on these needs are enormous from a

technical, operational, and financial basis. Small Adirondack communities host disproportionately large numbers of visitors, requiring levels of funding that their residents bear alone.

Since 2016, New York State has invested more than \$80 million in grants for clean water infrastructure projects for communities in the Adirondack Park (including the new projects in Plattsburgh and Queensbury that protect Adirondack waters). In spite of our success, the need continues to be great. **The Adirondack Council applauds Governor Hochul’s proposal for a \$500 million appropriation for the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act urges the legislature to support it.** If approved, this would amount to more than \$5 billion in grant appropriations since the creation of the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act (2017). Clean water infrastructure grants are essential for communities in the Adirondacks with lower median household incomes, even when combined with zero-interest loans. This fund also provides for septic system replacement, and county needs greatly exceed the current amounts they have been granted. As communities continue to enact local laws requiring septic system inspections, we expect the identified needs will grow rapidly.

Environmental Agency Staffing

The Adirondack Council applauds the proposed increases in staffing for the DEC, with 131 FTEs for the implementation of the Bond Act, and 52 FTEs for the Division of Air, and 2 FTEs for the Division of Lands and Forests. These increases are important as the state’s workload continues to grow, fighting climate change, protecting clean water and air, and preserving our beautiful landscapes. **What is most notably absent in this budget is a meaningful increase in the DEC’s Forest Ranger division, which has been desperately needed for some time.** Unfortunately, our Forest Rangers are still personally responsible for purchasing important equipment, like boots, which can cost them thousands of dollars once they have purchased all of the pairs they need for summer, winter, firefighting, and more. **Lastly, we recommend the state review its hiring practices and civil service requirements to ensure that they are attracting and hiring a diverse Ranger force.**

Thank you again for your time today and for considering our testimony. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions:

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