



CATSKILLCENTER

**Testimony of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development
Joint Legislative Public Hearing, Environmental Conservation Portion of the 2026-2027
Executive Budget Proposal, January 28, 2026**

The **Catskill Forest Preserve and Catskill Park** offer the natural, cultural, and historical significance of a National Park just two hours from the largest population center in the country. Few other places contain so much protected and undisturbed land so close to so many millions of people.

The Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks collectively represent more than 6.5 million acres of land which is nearly **a quarter of New York State**. The Catskill and Adirondack regions serve as home to over one million residents in Forest Preserve counties. In addition, there are more than 44 million visitors to the Catskills and Adirondacks each year, bringing \$5 billion to regional economies annually.

In our current climate crisis, the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks serve as the **lungs of NY**, 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 of residents, including 90% of New York City's water supply from within the Catskills region**.

In November of 2025, Catskill Center, ADK, and **over 50 other Adirondack and Catskill groups and municipalities** signed on to a letter to Governor Hochul highlighting the need to maintain the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) at \$425 million and provide **the \$10 million in dedicated funds for the Catskills and Adirondacks** within the State Land Stewardship funding in the Environmental Protection Fund's (EPF) Parks and Recreation Account.

In December of 2025, the Catskill Center, Catskill Mountainkeeper and more than two dozen other Catskill groups, organizations, and municipalities representing the Catskill Park Coalition, signed on to a letter to Governor Hochul celebrating gains for the **Catskill Park** and **called for continued funding for the Catskill Park priorities and the \$10 million in dedicated funds for the Catskill and Adirondack Parks**.

On behalf of the stakeholders and communities who cherish and depend on the Catskill and Adirondack Parks and their Forest Preserve lands, we respectfully request that the funding priorities outlined below be maintained or restored in the FY 2026-27 One-House Budget Proposals.

- Maintain at least \$425 million for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and begin working to increase the appropriation to \$500 million annually.
- Maintain at least \$10 million for the Adirondacks and Catskills under EPF State Land Stewardship.
- Maintain and restore \$1 million in the EPF for Adirondack and Catskill Visitor Centers
 - Restore \$250,000 Adirondack Mountain Club's (ADK) Visitor Center funding (at \$0 in Executive Budget Proposal, was at \$250,000 in last year's final budget)
 - Maintain funding for Catskills Visitor Center (at \$250,000 in Executive Budget Proposal)
 - Maintain funding for Paul Smith's Visitor Interpretive Center (at \$250,000 in Exec Budget)

- Maintain funding for SUNY ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center (at \$250,000 in Exec Budget)
- Maintain and restore \$600,000 in the EPF for Research and Monitoring
 - Maintain \$200,000 for Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies' Catskill Science Collaborative (currently in the Executive Budget)
 - Restore \$200,000 for the Adirondack Watershed Institute (AWI) (at \$0 in Executive Budget Proposal, was at \$200,000 in last year's final budget)
 - Restore \$200,000 for the Atmospheric Sciences Research Center (ASRC) Whiteface Mountain Field Station (at \$0 in Executive Budget Proposal, was at \$200,000 in last year's final budget)
- Maintain at least \$90 million for DEC Capital Projects
- Support \$340 million for "New York Works" OPRHP Capital Projects
- Maintain \$500 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Funding

Continue funding for SCALE, Timbuctoo Institute, Invasive Species, Smart Growth programs, historic sites, and other trail town infrastructure, and Diversity, Inclusivity and Accessibility initiatives to ensure all are welcome and have safe adventures.

The table below summarizes sections of the EPF in terms of funding requested by Adirondack and Catskill groups and what is proposed in the Executive Budget Proposal.

Unshaded table lines show requested increases or needed restoration.

Environmental Protection Fund	FY25-26 Enacted	FY26-27 Exec Prop	Request	Restore
**000s omitted. Some numbers rounded.				
TOTAL EPF	\$425 million	\$425 million	At least \$425 million	
Parks and Recreation Account				
State Land Stewardship	\$50,075	\$50,075	At least \$50,075	
<i>Parks & Trails NY Grants Program</i>	\$2,000	\$2,650	Support	
<i>Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety & wilderness protection</i>	\$10,000	\$8,000	\$10 mil	
<i>Ausable River Association for Adirondack Lake ecosystem study</i>	\$2,000	\$1,000	\$2 million	
<i>Adirondack Mountain Club visitor center</i>	\$250	\$0	\$250	Restore
<i>Adirondack Architectural Heritage Camp Santanoni Mngt</i>	\$750	\$750	Support	
Municipal Parks				
<i>SUNY ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center</i>	250	250	Support	
<i>Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center</i>	250	250	Support	
<i>Catskills Visitor Center</i>	250	250	Support	
Open Space Account	\$42,000	\$42,000	\$50 million	
<i>Biodiversity</i>				
<i>Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies Catskill Research</i>	\$200	\$200	Support	
<i>Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute</i>	\$100	\$0	\$200	Restore

<i>SUNY Albany Atmospheric Sciences Research Center</i>	\$100	\$0	\$200	<i>Restore</i>
<i>Invasive Species</i>	\$18,550	\$18,550	\$20 million	
<i>Cornell Hemlock Woolly Adelgid project</i>	\$500	\$500	<i>Support</i>	
<i>Environmental Justice</i>				
<i>Connect Kids Outdoor Recreation Program</i>	\$3,000	\$3,500	<i>Support</i>	
<i>Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Account</i>				
<i>Timbuctoo Institute</i>	\$1,250	\$1,250	\$2.1 mil	
<i>Smart Growth Grants</i>	\$3,800	\$3,900	\$4 mil	

Additional budget requests by Adirondack and Catskill Groups:

- \$420,000 for Adirondack Diversity Initiative. (at \$300,000 in ATL Exec Proposal)
- \$100,000 for educational stewards in ATL split between Catskill Center and Catskill Mountainkeeper

Increase the Dedicated Catskill and Adirondack Stewardship Funding line to \$10 million

We thank the Senate and the Assembly for your leadership and commitment in providing at least \$10 million in dedicated stewardship funds for the Catskills and Adirondacks in one-house budget bills and for including the full amount in the last two final budgets.

This funding has been an important step toward meeting the vision outlined by the Catskill Park and Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Groups (CAG and HPAG), to **protect wilderness**, provide safe and **welcoming visitor experiences**, and to **invest in Catskill and Adirondack communities**. 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, ecological monitoring, and Visitor Use Management (VUM) planning and implementation.

Retain and Restore Funding for Forest Preserve Visitor Centers

Visitor Centers currently welcome visitors, address stewardship, and promote communities in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks. 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 recreationists safe, educate youth and the public, and highlight community assets. In the EPF, **please continue your support of the following Visitor Centers at \$250,000 each**, including the:

- **Catskill Center for Conservation and Development’s Congressman Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center**
- **Adirondack Mountain Club’s High Peaks Information Center**
- **Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center;** and
- **SUNY ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center.**

Thanks to the work of the Senate and Assembly these Visitor Centers have been able to provide essential infrastructure for the Forest Preserve. They serve as the starting destinations for more visits to the region, helping visitors find information about recreation and events, and helping connect them with local communities. The Catskills and Adirondack Visitor Centers **are a year-round resource** for hikers, backpackers, snowshoers, and cross-country skiers - providing trip planning, weather reports, trail conditions, maps, guidebooks, and gear for rent or purchase to ensure recreators have safe, enjoyable adventures.

The Visitor Centers are **staffed year-round with Leave No Trace educators** and experienced outdoor recreationists. For many visitors to the Catskills and Adirondacks, their interaction with staff at the Visitor Centers is their only opportunity to engage with a knowledgeable authority on the Adirondack or Catskill Park. The Visitor Center properties have recreational facilities with **accessible features** including trails, campsites, picnic areas, interpretive displays, and restrooms. **Educational programming created by and offered at the centers reaches students in K-12 as well as at the undergraduate and graduate collegiate levels.** Collectively the centers work with schools from all of NY State's 62 counties, and support visiting classes from across the Northeast and Canada.

The Visitor Centers host **skills workshops and training courses.** They educate youth and the public. They also provide **flush toilet bathroom facilities,** as well as additional summer port-a-jons which reduce the pressure on backcountry privies and the impacts of improperly disposed of human waste. The Visitor Centers have **robust capacity for educational outreach** to educate people about **responsible outdoor recreation** before they leave home to travel to Catskills and Adirondacks.

Maintain and Restore Support for Research and Monitoring

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. 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 need to be restored to \$200,000 each, and **Cary** Institute of Ecosystem Studies should be maintained at \$200,00. The *Survey of Climate Change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems* (**SCALE**), and its project partners should also be supported. These facilities and programs track pollutants in air and water, monitor weather, disseminate data, and run essential programs like the **Catskill Science Collaborative.**

Healthy Parks Require Healthy Communities

Unlike other parks, the Catskill and Adirondack and 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. 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.

We also urge **the adoption and funding of recommendations of the New York Upstate Cellular Coverage Task Force.** Significant gaps in cellular and broadband coverage in the Catskills and Adirondacks create not only health and safety risks but also magnify limited economic and educational opportunities.

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 **DEIJ,** such as the work of the **Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI),** the **Timbuctoo Institute,** and the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report.** We appreciate your continued investment in rail trails (and their connector trails) in the Adirondacks and Catskills as recreational opportunities that serve multiple recreation groups and different types of users.

Increase DEC Capital Funding and Staff

The need for capital projects in the Forest Preserve is huge, but DEC has 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). Staffing increases are needed in the Division of Lands and Forests and in the Division of Operations.

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, and DEC's recent release of a draft Other Power Driven Mobility Device Policy (OPDMD) to guide and promote accessibility and inclusivity on its managed lands statewide, including the Forest Preserve.

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.

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Since 1969, the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development has been dedicated to preserving and promoting the unique natural, cultural, and recreational resources of the Catskills. Our focus on conservation, community, and connection drives our efforts to create a vibrant future for the Catskills through education, collaboration, and advocacy. We believe that the Catskills are a vital part of New York State's history and identity, and we work to ensure that this unique landscape and its communities are protected for future generations. We recognize the importance of supporting and growing the local economy in a way that is environmentally responsible. We are committed to providing educational resources and programming that helps people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities learn about and appreciate the natural world. We also work closely with local businesses, community organizations, and government agencies to promote thoughtful development and land use practices. Through our efforts, we hope to inspire a deep love and respect for the Catskills and its unique ecological, cultural, and recreational offerings. We are committed to being a strong voice for the Catskills as we work to create a bright future for this special place.