



Testimony Provided by the NYS Urban Forestry Council (NYSUFC)

Assemblywoman Glick, Senator Harckham, Assemblyman Pretlow, Senator Krueger and members of the Legislature, thank you for giving the NYS Urban Forestry Council the opportunity to provide this written testimony.

Introduction:

For more than 30 years, the New York State Urban Forestry Council (NYSUFC), a 501c3 non-profit organization, has been a trusted partner to the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) Program, helping deliver education, outreach, and statewide programming that the agency cannot provide on its own. This partnership has been supported through a U.S. Forest Service (USFS) grant mechanism that allowed a portion of federal funds to be directed to the Council.

Beginning in the 2025–26 fiscal year, the USFS will no longer process third-party grants due to staff reductions. This change eliminates \$134,900 in anticipated funding for 2025, creating a financial crisis for the Council and threatening the continuity of DEC's UCF outreach, education, and community programs across the state.

Potential Solution

In the short term, the Council is ramping up its fundraising efforts and restructuring operations to address the immediate loss of funding. However, a sustainable long-term solution is essential to maintain the programs and services that communities across New York rely on.

The most effective path forward is to establish a dedicated line item in the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) that designates annual support for the Council—similar to the allocations provided to other outside entities, such as \$1.5 million for the Land Trust Alliance, \$500,000 for the Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust, and \$500,000 for Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

The Council appreciates the Governor's inclusion of this designation in her Executive Budget and respectfully asks for your support to ensure it is included in both the Assembly and Senate one-house budgets.

Importantly, this request does not require new state spending. Instead, we ask that \$200,000 from the existing \$3.2 million land acquisition allocation already available for urban forestry projects be directed to the New York State Urban and Community Forestry Council to ensure continued support for urban forestry across the state.

Why the Council is an Essential Partner for DEC

DEC's Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) Program requires working with a non-state entity to help administer education and outreach activities

State limitations/restrictions: ReLeaf is the education and outreach component of the UCF program and has been a partnership with the Council since the 1990s. Each DEC region has a ReLeaf Committee made up of DEC urban forestry staff, Council members, and other professionals and volunteers interested/involved in local urban forestry activities.

- The UCF program does not have the ability to accept registration fees for workshops, trainings and conferences.
- UCF program staff cannot sign contracts with venues and vendors.
- The UCF program does not have the ability to hold and manage any ReLeaf Committee net profits from workshops, trainings and conferences.
- DEC cannot direct ReLeaf net profits or other funds to local communities for tree planting projects without a competitive process.
- DEC staff cannot solicit donations/sponsorships for conferences and other events.
- Some venues and vendors are uncomfortable with and would not accept DEC's "self-insured" as acceptable for proof of insurance.
- The state procurement process is very complicated and restrictive, requires a long lead time, and DEC has virtually no flexibility to choose venues and vendors based on the quality of the experience for attendees.
- Other events such as the Tree City USA and Tree Campus recognition events would likely not happen if the UCF program had to contract for the venues and caterers annually.

Forest Service Requirements: Under the Farm Bill, in order for a state to receive UCF funding from the USDA Forest Service, it needs to meet certain criteria including having an active state advisory council. Since the DEC is required to work with an advisory group, it makes sense for NYSUFC to be the partner to help with statewide programming.

The Council's work also contributes to federal reporting of municipal assists and accomplishments, which impacts NY's federal funding the following year.

The Council's Support

The UCF's program would not be as robust without an ongoing partner. Currently, the Council provides the following support:

ReLeaf Conferences and Workshops:

- Hosts workshop, conference and event registration forms on their website.
- Processes all registration fees.
- Manages a checking account for the statewide ReLeaf program. And tracks each regional ReLeaf committee's allotment of funds.
- Pays event expenses.
- Provides accounting services and reconciliation of the account.
- Signs venue and vendor contracts.
- Solicits sponsorships to reduce the cost of events.
- Manages the conference budget, finalizes arrangements with venue, vendors and sponsors, and reports out to the conference planning committee.
- Council staff and board members are active participants on regional ReLeaf Committees, and the annual conference committee, helping to plan and execute multiple events each year, including offering their expertise as presenters.
- ReLeaf Committees are able to use any net profits from their workshops for local tree planting, training and other urban forestry activities.

Small Grants

- Quick Start Grants are awarded to municipalities who want to work toward Tree City USA certification, a recognition program run by the Arbor Day Foundation and administered at the local level by state forestry agencies. This certification helps communities start and grow their own urban forestry programs. The federal 3rd party grant allows the Council to offer and administer these grants on DEC's behalf.
- The Council administers a Tree City Reward Grant program to encourage ongoing participation and annual recertification in the Tree City USA program.
- The Council administers a Tree Campus K-12 grant to encourage schools to develop an urban forestry program, engage students in urban forestry activities, and be certified in the Arbor Day Foundation's Tree Campus K-12 program.

Tree City/Campus/Line USA recognition events

- The Council contracts for the venues and vendors of these annual recognition events in which participants share their knowledge and experience, connect with others doing similar work, and of course, are recognized for their accomplishments.

e-Resources

- As the only NGO solely focused on promoting urban forestry across New York State, the council hosts a lot of materials on its website that the UCF program could not host on DEC's large site, including a library of community forest management plans funded by the UCF program. The Council has a vibrant blog, monthly newsletter and social media presence, complementing what the UCF program can post through DEC. As a large agency, DEC needs to cover all agency programs and support Governor initiatives. The Council is able to focus 100% on promoting urban forestry across the state, and draw on what others are doing state-, nation- and world-wide.

In closing:

The New York State Urban Forestry Council is an essential partner to DEC in ensuring that communities across New York have the education, resources, and support needed to strengthen and maintain their urban forests. The recent changes at the U.S. Forest Service put this decades-long partnership, and the outreach and programming that depend on it, at risk.

We are asking for your support in securing a dedicated line item within the Environmental Protection Fund that reallocates \$200,000 from the existing urban forestry allocation to the New York State Urban and Community Forestry Council. This targeted action will not increase overall state spending but will ensure continuity of vital education, outreach, recognition programs, and community grants that cannot be delivered without the Council's unique role.

With your leadership, New York can continue to model how strong partnerships between state agencies and nonprofits deliver real, on-the-ground results for communities, improve quality of life, and strengthen resilience against climate change.

We urge you to champion this request in the upcoming budget negotiations so that urban forestry across New York State can remain strong, innovative, and effective.

EPF Language

Recommended change to 2025-26 language (page 168, DEC Capital Projects lines 7-17):

(a) notwithstanding any law to the contrary, \$3,200,000 from the land acquisition allocation for urban forestry projects provided that no less than \$500,000 shall be made available for such programs in cities and towns with populations of 65,000 or more, including up to \$200,000 to the New York State Urban and Community Forestry Council for support of urban forestry in New York State, and including up to \$200,000 for municipal grants for re-treesing public lands impacted by ~~the~~ invasive species;

Examples of 2025-26 EPF budget language directing funds to other organizations

Land Trust Alliance page 168

(b) notwithstanding any law to the contrary, \$3,000,000 from the land acquisition allocation to the land trust alliance for the purpose of awarding grants on a competitive basis to local land trusts, provided that up to ten percent of such amount may be made available for administrative costs and/or technical assistance; ... (d) \$1,500,000 to the land trust alliance for the purpose of

awarding grants on a competitive basis to local land trusts to purchase conservation easements, provided that up to ten percent of such amount may be made available for administrative costs and/or technical assistance;

Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust page 168

(e) up to \$250,000 shall be made available to the tug hill tomorrow land trust for army compatible use buffer program projects around Fort Drum;

ESF page 174

(d) \$250,000 to the State University of New York college of environmental science and forestry;

Paul Smith's College page 174

(e) \$250,000 to Paul Smith's College for the support of the Adirondack Park interpretive centers; (f) \$250,000 to the Catskill Center for conservation and development for the support of the Catskill Visitors Center;