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AN INITIATIVE OF THE OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

**Testimony Before Joint Fiscal Committees
of the State Legislature on the FY2013-14 State Budget**

**Alliance for New York State Parks
Open Space Institute**

**Erik Kulleseid
Executive Director/Senior Vice President**

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Senate Finance Chair DeFrancisco and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Farrell, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Cuomo's proposed budget as it relates to our state parks and the Environmental Protection Fund.

Thanks also to Senator Little and Assemblywoman Markey, Chairs of the Tourism Committees, and Senator Grisanti and Assemblyman Sweeney, Chairs of the Environmental Conservation Committees, as well as other members here today.

I am Erik Kulleseid, Senior Vice President at the Open Space Institute and Executive Director of its Alliance for New York State Parks program. OSI is one of New York's leading land and park conservation nonprofits. The mission of the Alliance program is to protect and enhance New York's state parks and historic sites by leveraging the resources of the private and public sectors.

My testimony falls into two parts, the first related to the proposed capital budget for state parks, the second to agency operations and the EPF.

We remain grateful to members of the legislature for their strong support for state parks in many ways over the course of the last several years. And we are tremendously pleased that Governor Cuomo's proposed budget reaches new heights in demonstrating his administration's commitment to restoring New York's great state parks.

As you may know, after decades of deferred maintenance and underinvestment at New York's state parks, Governor Cuomo has made a sustained commitment to restoring state parks, and addressing a capital backlog total still nearing \$1 billion.

The \$90 million for state park repairs and improvements included in the proposed spending plan is a continuation of Governor Cuomo's commitment to improving state parks. Having appropriated more than \$200 million over the past two years for state park restorations, the governor, with the support of the legislature, recognizes the value of parks, both as recreational and cultural destinations, and as economic drivers.

Never in the history of the New York State Park system has there been this level of sustained investment to upgrade and restore New York's state parks. These investments are transforming a once beleaguered system and restoring our greatest natural treasures as sources of pride, community vitality and economic strength. As an appropriate example, I encourage you all to visit Niagara Falls State Park, the nation's oldest state park. The transformation of its historic and breathtaking landscapes is remarkable.

On behalf of the 60 million people who visit state parks each year and the businesses and workers that benefit from the economic activity they spur, we appreciate all Governor Cuomo and the Legislature have done to address the nearly one billion dollars needed for infrastructure repairs and improvements and look forward to working with the Senate and Assembly members to secure this latest installment in parks capital funding.

On the operations side of the ledger, this year's budget by-and-large freezes funding to last year's levels. For an agency that has seen its budget cut by twenty percent over recent years, faces rising costs for both personal and non-personal services and is serving a growing number of visitors, it is difficult to argue that the agency is truly being "held harmless."

We once again credit Commissioner Rose Harvey for leading the Office of Parks during lean times. She effectively confronts challenges head-on and is committed to rethinking the way the agency functions. She has embraced Alliance fundraising efforts; supported the idea of repurposing unused state park assets, where appropriate; partnered with local governments and not-for profits; and seized on opportunities to promote more public-private partnerships.

As I mentioned earlier, the Alliance is a new program of the Open Space Institute, an organization long associated with the expansion of state parks, forest preserves and natural areas. In fact, over the course of OSI's 40 year history, we have had a hand in conserving a full ten percent of New York's 335,000 acres of state park land, not to mention our work to expand state forest preserve and wildlife lands.

Much of this work has been achieved thanks to the Environmental Protection Fund. The EPF has been key to helping OSI add to, protect and buffer dozens of state parks, including Thacher, Moreau, Sterling Forest, Fahnestock and Minnewaska. In fact, with a transaction that occurred at the end of last year, I can proudly say that OSI and its partners have more than doubled the size of Minnewaska State Park Preserve, with the end result being a 21,000-acre park preserve, all permanently protected and accessible to the public—and less than 100 miles from New York City.

I tell you this to underscore the critical importance of the EPF. We are grateful that the funding level for the EPF has been on the uptick over recent years – in large part, thanks to the hard work of the legislators before me. It is promising that the governor's proposed budget provides a \$4 million increase to the EPF.

Regrettably, New York's environmental funding needs greatly exceed this level. From protecting water supplies, family farms and parkland to helping local communities deal with an array of waste disposal issues, including hazardous materials, landfill maintenance and recycling programs, a strong EPF is fundamental to the protection of the state's natural resources and a robust economy for this and future generations. As such, I respectfully urge an increase in the EPF to \$200 million.

Additionally, just as I expressed concerns about staffing levels and stagnant operating funding at State Parks, there is a compelling case to be made for the Department of Environmental Conservation, which is similarly struggling to maintain services for the public on its own lands.

In closing, and on behalf of the more than 60 million people who visit state parks each year, we again express our gratitude for the support of state parks, both from Governor Cuomo and members of the Senate and Assembly.