



**Department of
Environmental
Conservation**

**Testimony of
Basil Seggos
Commissioner
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation**

**New York State Legislature
Senate Standing Committee on Finance
Assembly Standing Committee on Ways and Means
Hearing:**

**The 2021-2022 Executive Budget Recommendations for the
Department of Environmental Conservation**

January 27, 2021

Good morning Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and members of the legislative, fiscal, and environmental conservation committees. I am Basil Seggos, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Cuomo's environmental priorities for State Fiscal Year 2021-2022.

Marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was a remarkably challenging year for our state, the nation, and the world. It is hard to believe everything that has happened in the year since we last spoke at this hearing, but out of the darkness I am proud to say that DEC staff shined brightly in the Governor's efforts to battle the pandemic. Our Forest Rangers, Environmental Conservation Police Officers, and Emergency Management personnel continue to work in leadership roles on the frontlines of the COVID response. Overall, 1,015 DEC staff have volunteered to help combat the epidemic— more than a third of the agency. From constructing and managing testing and mass vaccination sites, to delivering food, PPE, and test kits, and staffing Department of Health and unemployment call centers, DEC staff continue to be instrumental in ensuring an effective state response. I cannot thank them enough for their tireless and selfless efforts.

Throughout this crisis, DEC continued to focus on our core mission as we responded to keep our employees and the public safe. We transitioned quickly and efficiently to a remote working environment. We created new virtual resources, hosted hundreds of virtual meetings and hearings to ensure safe public participation and access to information. And to engage housebound New Yorkers, DEC hosted hundreds of live social media events and workshops. Our professional staff did not miss a beat as we rose effectively to the challenges of NY on Pause.

As you know, DEC manages more than five million acres of open space. During the pandemic we worked to manage the unprecedented numbers of New Yorkers desperate to get outside and experience nature after months at home. With our partners at State Parks, we promoted safe and responsible recreation with the *Play Safe * Play Smart * Play Local* campaign and Leave No Trace principles. In addition, we established the High Peaks and Catskills Advisory Groups to strategize with partners on the ground about protecting these lands for future generations.

Environmental justice is one of DEC's most critical missions. It has been no secret that disadvantaged communities have disproportionately and historically borne the brunt of pollution, but this year's protests across the country calling for racial equality have brought the issue front and center. DEC redoubled its environmental justice effort by bolstering policies and programs, strengthening relationships with Indian Nations, and awarding millions of dollars in grants to environmental justice organizations.

Despite the challenges of 2020, we maintained the State's national leadership on the environment in partnership with you and other leaders. We continue to lead the nation on climate action through implementation of the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA). DEC and our partners at NYSERDA launched the 22-member Climate Action Council (CAC) last year to develop the blueprint to achieve our emissions-reduction goals. Working with the sector-specific advisory panels, we are on track to meet the goals of the legislation and have already met the key interim milestones of establishing the value of carbon guidance and enacting greenhouse gas emissions regulations.

As you know, DEC began enforcing the plastic bag ban last year, launching the #BYOBagNY education and outreach campaign and distributing more than 400,000 reusable bags to needy New Yorkers in partnership with the Feeding NYS food bank network. In addition, we continued to advance priority projects, including expanding the State's artificial reef network, cleaning former industrial sites, advancing the Resiliency and Economic Development Initiative (REDI) along Lake Ontario, mitigating harmful algal blooms, and protecting New York's natural resources.

Fulfilling the agency's core mission during the epidemic required innovation. Shifting to virtual communications enhanced our outreach efforts and drove public participation. For example, we offered a new, online hunter education program and participation tripled. Hunting and trapping license sales increased by 11 percent. This uptick in hunting has the added benefit of providing additional funding to the Conservation Fund, with an increase of more than \$4 million this year.

Building on our 50 years of robust environmental protection, this year's budget continues the Governor's strong legacy of environmental protection. The Executive Budget proposes to maintain the Environmental Protection Fund at \$300 million. The budget also commits an additional \$500 million for critical water infrastructure and water quality protection programs. In addition, the budget also invests \$100 million in the State Superfund program, which is vital to advance our comprehensive cleanup efforts.

The Executive Budget also proposes to boost our conservation recreation efforts in two important ways. First, we propose to expand youth hunting to allow junior hunters ages 12 to 13 to hunt big game when accompanied by a parent, guardian, or mentor. Second, we propose to expand the use of crossbows during big game season. The Governor is capitalizing on the expanding interest in outdoor recreation, growing a new generation of safe hunters and stimulating the state's vital hunting economy.

To further ensure the continued effective implementation of the plastic bag ban, the budget also provides much needed clarification regarding the types of reusable bags that are permissible based on a recent court decision on the law.

To support all these initiatives, DEC's budget for the coming year recommends State Operations appropriations of \$463 million and a Capital Budget totaling \$1.35 billion. The budget anticipates DEC at 2,940 employees and provides \$75.25 million in NY Works funding for infrastructure projects across the state. These commitments allow DEC to continue our vital work protecting the health of our residents and our environment.

The Governor's Agenda for 2021 is aptly titled: REIMAGINE | REBUILD | RENEW, words that have guided our agency since its creation more than 50 years ago, and more important now than ever. Despite the challenges of 2020, we continue to look forward and by working together, we will emerge from the pandemic stronger than ever. I look forward to our continued work together as we advance this important environmental agenda set forth by the Governor and I am happy to answer your questions on his budget proposal today.