



Public Testimony of Kate Boicourt, Director, Climate Resilient Coasts and Watersheds, NY-NJ, Environmental Defense Fund

New York State Legislature Joint Legislative Hearing on the Environmental Conservation portions of the Executive Budget proposal for New York State fiscal year 2022-23

February 1, 2022

My name is Kate Boicourt and I am the Director for Climate Resilience Coasts and Watersheds for the Environmental Defense Fund in New York and New Jersey. On behalf of our 250,000 members and activists in New York State, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the Executive Budget Proposal for State Fiscal Year 2022-23.

Environmental Defense Fund

One of the world's leading international nonprofit organizations, **Environmental Defense Fund** (edf.org) creates transformational solutions to the most serious environmental problems. To do so, EDF links science, economics, law, and innovative private-sector partnerships. With more than 2.5 million members and offices in the United States, China, Mexico, Indonesia and the European Union, EDF's scientists, economists, attorneys and policy experts are working in 28 countries to turn our solutions into action.

Thank you for your leadership on protecting the environment that New York residents and ecosystems depend on for clean air, water, health, and more. These resources are always critical, but with an increasing frequency of extreme storms, flooding, and heat, and the current pandemic, these resources have become increasingly important.

In the past ten years, extreme storms, and flooding, most notably from Hurricanes Sandy and Ida, led to the loss of dozens of lives and caused more than \$100 billion in damages. According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment, the heaviest rains in the Northeast already produce 55% more rain compared to the 1950s and could increase another 40% by 2100. Without action, 2.9 million people and \$2.1 trillion in assets in the region are at risk of flooding by 2070. And these risks are born unequally, hitting hardest in low wealth communities and communities of color. We are operating in an already impacted system, in which a loss of the very natural infrastructure that used to protect us has contributed to rising risks. But you have the power to shift that trajectory through strategic investments in nature that will reap dividends in clean air and water, and create jobs.

I urge you to support the following as a wise investment in our future.

Changes to the Bond Act

We applaud Governor Hochul for her proposal to rename and increase the Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act by \$1 billion to \$4 billion, and we urge the Legislature to support these changes. In particular,

- The name “Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act” will more clearly convey its purpose to the public.
- With Ida recently demonstrating the financial impact one storm can make, it is only fitting that we increase our investments in nature and resilience. It has been demonstrated that one dollar spent on resilience can reap returns of six or more. This expansion will also enable the measure to benefit more communities through clean air, water, climate and flood mitigation, reduced heat, habitat conservation, and outdoor recreation.
- The measure will support more than 65,000 jobs and allow New York to leverage federal, local, and private funding, particularly at a historic time of investments in federal programs that benefit resilience, water, and nature, for which these funds may serve as match.

Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)

The proposed increase in the EPF to \$400 million will expand this critical program and help to improve the quality of life in every county of New York State. We applaud the Governor’s proposal and urge the Legislature to support an EPF of at least \$400 million during budget negotiations. This funding marks a huge step forward on the path to achieve the environmental community’s long-term goal of a \$500 million EPF.

- According to a study by The Trust for Public Land, every \$1 invested in land and water conservation through the EPF returns \$7 to the state.
- The EPF supports 350,000 jobs across New York in a broad spectrum of industries including construction, agriculture, recreation, tourism, forestry, recycling, and recreational fishing.
- EPF-supported industries add \$40 billion to the state’s economy every year.

State Agency Capital Funding

Governor Hochul’s budget increases capital funding for DEC and State Parks. These agencies have historically been understaffed to meet demand, and increases will help to provide the important outdoor recreational spaces that we depend on and that bring tourism to our state. We urge you to support at least the proposed \$200 million in capital funds, toward a goal of reaching \$300 million for this program.

Clean Water Funding

We support a \$1 billion investment in the Clean Water Infrastructure Act (CWIA) as an investment reflecting the need demonstrated across the state. Shovel-ready projects to address our critical drinking water and sewer needs will help to create jobs and make our communities safer. It has been estimated by the American Society of Civil Engineers that New York State’s need for drinking water infrastructure alone is \$22.9 billion over the next 20 years. Wastewater adds an additional \$31.4 billion in need. With the CWIA funding around a dozen different programs, only investing \$500 million may leave critical programs underfunded and force local governments to make choices that leave our communities unsafe.

State Agency Staffing

As increasing pressures are placed on our natural resources, we need to build back the staff capacity of our environmental agencies. Public parks and outdoors spaces are seeing increased use, increased permitting needs are meeting up against resources, and the challenges of mitigating and adapting to climate change require new skill sets and expanded capacity to meet our goals. Governor Hochul's budget proposes increases in staff numbers at the Department of Environmental Conservation (94), State Parks (53), and Agriculture and Markets (31). These additional staff, along with the recent lifting of the state agency hiring freeze, will begin to restore staff levels so that these agencies can more effectively deploy programs and funding. We encourage you to see these state agency personnel levels as a floor from which to build toward meeting increased demands and the changes we face in the coming years.

Wetlands protections

Governor Hochul's budget proposal included increased protections that would result in needed protections for one million wetlands in the state. These wetlands are critically important, filtering pollutants in our water while serving as a buffer against the worst impacts of climate change-fueled flooding and providing a home for many species of fish, amphibians, mammals and birds native to New York. The existing wetland protections are both outdated and inadequate. Paired with the legislative proposal, the increased budgetary investments in agency staff (including of currently understaffed permitting programs) and grant programs will support increased wetlands protections that will have impact for centuries on a safer, healthier, more resilient New York State.

Conclusion

I thank you again for the opportunity to testify in support of these important investments in the most basic elements that all New Yorkers enjoy – our air, our water, and our natural resources.

Thank you for investing in our future, and I look forward to working with you this year and going forward toward protecting and investing our natural resources for New York State's people and ecosystems.

For more information, contact:

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