



Catskill Mountainkeeper's Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget Testimony

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing, Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means Committees

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Thank you Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and members of the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means committees for the opportunity to weigh in on Governor Hochul's FY 2024 Executive Budget.

Catskill Mountainkeeper's mission is to protect our region's forests and wild lands; safeguard air and water; nurture healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities; empower environmental justice communities; and accelerate the transition to a 100% clean and just energy future in New York State and beyond.

Testimony Overview

Mountainkeeper's testimony today covers the funding for the Catskill Park and implementing the Catskills High Use Advisory Group (CAG) recommendations, establishing and capitalizing a Climate and Community Protection Fund, supporting the Climate Jobs and Justice package, supporting sustainable agriculture, continuing support for our state's Forest Preserves via the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), endorsing strong staffing at the Department of Environmental Conservation, passing the Birds and Bees Protection Act (BBPA), and Route 17 expansion.

Implementing the Catskills High Use Advisory Group Recommendations & Funding the Catskill Park

Mountainkeeper is dedicated to protecting and enhancing the Catskill Park and Forest Preserves, the crown jewel of our region and one of the largest and most ecologically diverse

natural areas in the East. And though we refer to it as a “park,” its lands are both public and private; a mix of constitutionally protected ‘Forever Wild’ forest preserve, various classes of state lands, lands protected by New York City to safeguard the integrity of its unfiltered water supply, and bustling towns and villages.

Since 2012, the number of annual visitors to the Catskill Park has more than doubled and in 2021, the park welcomed more visitors than the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Yellowstone combined. The Park and Region is consistently featured in travel magazines and blogs as a premier destination thanks to our blend of natural and built attractions.

Managing the Catskill Park’s wild lands and pristine waters is a complex operation, overseen by DEC. One of the challenges advocates throughout the region and park managers at DEC face, and embrace, is that given the ‘forever wild’ designation, these treasured lands and waters are more susceptible to damage and deterioration than traditional parks, which rely on heavily built infrastructure to protect natural ecosystems.

Over the past several years, Catskill Mountainkeeper has focused on educating legislators and the general public about the increasing number of visitors to the Catskill Park. Given our role in the region, we were honored to serve on the governor’s Catskills High Peaks Advisory Group (CAG) which released its [final recommendations to address issues related to high-use](#) in December 2022. **The main takeaway:** in order to protect the Park’s water, lands, and wildlife habitat for generations to come while also creating a safe and welcoming space for hikers, anglers, and day-trippers, **New York State needs to adopt a whole-park management plan.** And a whole-park management plan will require significant investment in, and ongoing dedication to, maintaining the Park.

To develop and implement a whole-park management plan, New York needs to: increase staff at DEC, especially in Regions 3 and 4; invest in research to tackle the knowledge gaps prevalent throughout the Park; dedicate capital funding to increasing trail maintenance, parking access, and other infrastructure to support healthy use of public spaces; provide support for better coordination amongst government entities; and invest in greater public education.

The Catskill Park and Forest Preserve are unique because they are managed differently from other state parks—they receive none of the state funding allocated for Parks. Instead, funding for the Catskill Park and Forest Preserve is via the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) budget and the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF).

Protecting the Catskills & Funding the EPF

Mountainkeeper **strongly supports Governor Hochul’s proposed \$400 million EPF** and urges the legislature to support this appropriation throughout budget negotiations.

Thanks to the legislature’s leadership, the 2022-2023 EPF included an \$8m **line for 'Adirondack and Catskill Visitor Safety & Wilderness protection'** from the Parks & Recreation account, under the 'State Land Stewardship' line. The DEC has those funds encumbered or committed to critically important park projects including those in the chart in Appendix B. However, as you can see, the projects supported by the Catskill and Adirondack dedicated funding line in the EPF are not one and done projects—maintaining these projects are ongoing needs.

Therefore, we are asking the legislature to add the dedicated **'Adirondack and Catskill Visitor Safety & Wilderness protection'** line into the 2023-2024 EPF and to appropriate \$10 million to its uses.

As an organization supported by tens of thousands of avid environmentalists and outdoor enthusiasts, we’re calling on the legislature to help secure and preserve the funding that will enable the Catskills not only to address the challenges facing the park and forest preserve today, but also to build the foundation that will allow the Catskills to shine for generations to come.

Finally, as a co-leader of the Catskill Park Coalition, Mountainkeeper is advancing the coalition’s priorities as our own; please see Attachment A for further detail.

Increasing DEC Staff Levels

Governor Hochul’s budget increases staffing at environmental agencies by 265 staff – including 131 at DEC and 89 at the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and Mountainkeeper calls on the Legislature to maintain these increases in the final budget.

Unfortunately, the Executive has also called for language that would allow for EPF funding to be used to support staff lines, a proposal Mountainkeeper strongly opposes. The EPF has historically been designated to support critically important capital projects that protect clean water, clean air, and healthy communities. Allowing DEC to fund staff lines out of the EPF could decimate the availability of funds for their intended purposes.

Catskill Stewards

In 2021, Catskill Mountainkeeper joined together with the Catskill Center to put boots on the ground at certain high use areas through our Catskill Stewards program. For the past two years, Mountainkeeper posted stewards on the trails, rotating through four popular spots on the western side of the Catskills. Our stewards interacted with visitors, sharing the principles of

Leave No Trace and basic outdoor skills; helped with trail maintenance, cleanups, and invasive species management; and assisted rangers with front-country management needs.

The stewards program is an invaluable initiative that helps visitors recreate safely and protects our trails, trailheads, and waterfronts.

In 2021 and 2022 the Legislature funded the stewards program through a \$100,000 line in the Aid to Localities budget, with \$50,000 split evenly between the Catskill Center and Mountainkeeper, and we thank the houses for investing in the program. This year, **Mountainkeeper calls on the Legislature to increase stewards funding to \$200,000, again split between our organization and the Catskill Center, and to continue the specific call-out for each organization in the budget.** Mountainkeeper and the Catskill Center bring a wealth of experience and place-based knowledge to this work; if a funding line were included without a call-out, it's possible that the dollars could go to an organization based outside the Catskills, one without local knowledge or expertise to share with those who visit.

Supporting the Climate, Jobs & Justice Package

As a NY Renews Steering Committee member, Catskill Mountainkeeper fully supports the Climate, Jobs, and Justice Package, and incorporates NY Renews' testimony here by reference.

The Climate and Community Protection Fund (CCPF) is one piece of the package that stands to dovetail perfectly with the Governor's TED AAA proposal for disbursing funds from a Cap & Invest program (C&I). If the state is to adopt a C&I program, the legislature must ensure that it is constructed cautiously to prevent increasing pollution in already overburdened communities, being manipulated by polluters, or interacting negatively with other climate programs. Furthermore, a C&I program must be transparent and benefit **all** New Yorkers. Any revenue generated must be appropriated in a clear, transparent, and accountable manner. That's where the CCPF comes in.

A CCPF would be a permanent special purpose fund in state law, modeled on the EPF and authorizing four accounts to invest C&I revenues to the benefit of communities, workers, and small businesses across New York State. The four funds outlined in the CCPF are:

- Climate, Jobs, and Infrastructure Fund, which directs funding for increasing building efficiency, updating our energy infrastructure, expanding public transit upstate and in Long Island, and more.
- Community-Directed Climate Solutions Fund, which directs grants to community organizations for grassroots-led energy planning, reducing local emissions, and more because community members know what their community needs.

- Community and Worker Transition Assistance, which provides direct support like job training to impacted workers, funds to replace lost tax revenue for municipalities and school districts, and expands economic development programs, among other things.
- Energy Affordability Account, which includes rebate programs alongside additional measures to assist low and moderate-income families and small businesses to reduce the burden of energy costs while lowering emissions.

Supporting Sustainable Agriculture & Healthy Communities

The Catskills Region is New York’s breadbasket, home to family farms that produce the food that sustains our communities, while supporting the regional economy. Catskill Mountainkeeper is a member of the NY Grown Food for NY Kids Coalition, an group of organizations working to support both our state’s farms and our children by ensuring our schools are purchasing healthy, local food. As such we support the coalition’s budget proposals including:

- \$10 million for the Farm to School Incentive
- \$3 million for the Farm to School Grants
- Expanding the Farm to School Incentive to include all school meals and
- \$3 million for the Farm to School Grants program.

In recent years, the state has also funded Organic Price Index and Organic Food and Farm Guide tools that assist farmers in marketing their products and consumers in accessing local organic options. To build on these successes, Catskill Mountainkeeper requests that \$200,000 from the 2023-2024 budget be appropriated to launch a project that will improve the accessibility of the certification materials. We urge committee members to include this funding in the final budget.

Pass the Birds and Bees Protection Act

The Birds and Bees Protection Act (A3226/S1856)—which passed the state Assembly last session with bipartisan, supermajority support —would address worsening neonic contamination by banning the harmful and unnecessary uses accounting for 80-90% of the neonics entering the state’s environment every year. Specifically, it targets neonic coatings on corn, wheat, and soybean seeds—which the Cornell Report found provide “no overall net income benefit” to farmers—as well as unneeded non-agricultural lawn and garden uses that pose significant risks to pollinators and drinking water sources.

Opposing Expanding Route 17

Catskill Mountainkeeper has joined with civic and environmental groups to oppose a billion dollar plan to expand New York State Route 17 in rural Sullivan County by 50 miles, making the road into a six lane superhighway. Advancing this massive highway widening project would not

only fail to reduce traffic congestion, but would also run afoul of New York climate requirements to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

The state's plan, a relic of a bygone era, would also accelerate unsustainable rural sprawl, divert resources away from critical mass transit needs, threaten nationally significant park lands and other natural areas, and may disproportionately impact low income communities and communities of color. Widening Route 17 is also inconsistent with federal transportation policies and the use of federal highway monies.

Mountainkeeper calls on the Legislature to stand with us to oppose this misguided proposal, and to ensure that no state funding goes to support the plan.

Appendix A

Catskill Park Coalition Priorities for the SFY 2023-2024:

Public Safety and Catskill Park Management -- Given the exponential growth in the number of visitors, there is an increasing need for NYSDEC staff to properly address public safety and the Catskill Park's infrastructure and natural resources. As such, the Catskill Park Coalition calls for:

- **Supporting the recently created Catskill Park Coordinator position** within the NYSDEC with adequate financial and staffing resources;
- **Staffing critical positions at the NYSDEC's Division of Lands and Forests** in Region 3 and 4 to better manage the Catskill Park and its more than 1.7 million annual visitors; and
- **Running an annual Forest Ranger Academy** to maintain and increase Ranger staff to provide a safe experience for all who visit the Catskill Park.

Environmental Protection Fund Priorities to Enhance and Protect the Catskills --

Critical funding for the Catskill Park is provided within the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). The Environmental Protection Fund should be maintained at \$400 million to adequately protect New York's environment and specifically for the responsible protection and management of natural and recreational resources in the Catskill Park. Within the EPF, the Catskill Park Coalition calls for the following:

- **Existing Catskill Park Funding:**
 - o \$10 million Forest Preserve line to support Catskill and Adirondack Parks and address increasing visitor use;
 - o \$200,000 line, directed to the Catskill Center for Conservation and

Development for the Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center for operations, staffing, and programming;

- o \$150,000 line, directed to the Cary Institute for Ecosystem Studies for the Catskill Science Collaborative, which directs research on topics of importance in the Catskills;
- o \$750,000 line directed to Cornell University for the “Save the Hemlocks” initiative to fight the invasive Hemlock Woolly Adelgid with effective biocontrols;
- o At least \$300,000 for Smart Growth Grants dedicated to help Catskill communities and nonprofits sustainably improve the Park; and
- o Continued inclusion of funding for upgrades and improvements to the state-owned Belleayre Mountain Ski Center.

- **New Catskill Park Funding:**

- o A new line containing at least \$200,000 for Catskill Stewards, directed to the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development and Catskill Mountainkeeper, to support the existing education and stewardship program to address increasing numbers of visitors across the Park.

Supporting Local Economies -- Supporting towns, villages, and hamlets within the Catskill Park by investing in projects with direct community benefits while addressing increasing visitor pressures is key to supporting local economies and protecting natural resources.

Therefore, the Catskill Park Coalition calls for:

- **Improving cellular service across the Catskill Park** – The lack of service across large portions of the Park is a public safety concern and a competitive disadvantage for local communities and businesses that cannot be discovered by visitors;
- **Supporting construction of Phase 1 of the U&D Rail Trail** in a corridor that runs adjacent to New York State Forest Preserve Lands in the Town of Shandaken. Funding for Phase 1 will cover the conversion of a 2.5 mile stretch of the abandoned Ulster & Delaware Railroad Corridor into a public recreational trail from the Belleayre Beach Day Use Area west to Highmount and the Belleayre Ski Center, including the rehabilitation and repurposing of two historic railroad bridges;
- **Expanding availability of affordable housing** within and adjacent to the Catskill Park; and
- **Improving trail connectivity** with connections to community main streets and within the existing trail network to expand recreational opportunities.

Project	Forest Preserve	Funding
Catskill Front Country Access Improvement	Catskills	500,000
Catskills Trailless Peaks VUM	Catskills	50,000
Catskills High Use Area Improvement	Catskills	750,000
Catskill Water Access --River Parking	Catskills	30,000
Catskills Parking Improvement	Catskills	200,000
Adirondack Parking Improvement	Adirondacks	30,000
Adirondack Water Access Projects	Adirondacks	1,500,000
Trailhead Maintenance	Adirondacks	200,000
Adirondack trail infrastructure, resilience	Adirondacks	1,650,000
Primitive Trail Contract Expansion	Catskills & Adirondacks	1,150,000
Catskill and Adirondack Frontcountry Stewards	Catskills & Adirondacks	1,000,000
Access for All Projects	Catskills & Adirondacks, yearly	500,000
Materials for Projects	Catskills & Adirondacks, yearly	250,000
Small Trail Projects	Catskills & Adirondacks, yearly	500,000

Visitor Use Management Framework Implementation	Catskills & Adirondacks, yearly	250,000
Total		8,560,000