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**2023 Joint Legislative
Budget Hearing Testimony
Environmental Conservation**

**Submitted on Behalf of the
Forest Ranger
Officers, Lieutenants and Superior Officers
Benevolent Associations**

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February 14, 2023

Good afternoon members of the legislature. My name is Art Perryman. I appear today as the Director of the New York State Forest Rangers Benevolent Association – part of the Police Benevolent Association of New York State which represents Forest Rangers, Environmental Conservation Officers, Park Police and State University Police. I am also appearing today on behalf of the New York State Forest Rangers Lieutenants Benevolent Association and the New York State Forest Rangers Superior Officers Association.

I have been a New York State Forest Ranger for 21 years and am currently stationed in Region 5, Warren County. I am here today to testify about the status of the Forest Ranger Division within DEC.

This year the Forest Ranger Division continued to use our expertise in The Incident Command System to manage large incidents around the state. We continued to protect state lands and the people who use those lands through law enforcement and education. We responded to and fought wildland fires. We also responded to hundreds of search and rescue missions in the State of New York.

Equipment

The Forest Ranger Division needs to secure more funding for equipment. I want to thank Commissioner Seggos for making the funding of the Forest Ranger Division a higher priority. However, with the addition of 38 new rangers the division still finds itself playing catchup with regard to essential equipment.

Even though the Department has pledged a good faith effort to adequately outfit Forest Rangers they are still buying their own gear to perform winter rescues. The snowmobile and boat fleet used on rescues need updating. It will take a more robust budget to plan for an orderly replacement process.

I believe that the Division needs to see this orderly replacement schedule in each year's budget rather than reactive replacement once equipment degrades beyond its useful life. To accomplish this the Environmental Protection Fund Stewardship Allotment and General Fund money that comes to the Division could be, and should be, increased.

Wildfire Out of State Deployment

In addition to being the lead agency for wildland firefighting in New York State, Forest Rangers have become nationally respected for fighting wildfires across the west, Alaska, and Canada.

Unfortunately, in 2022, no Forest Rangers went out of State due to staffing concerns. Other states in the Northeast have a far more robust wildland fire program. It is time for New York State to take a greater role in fighting and preparing for large scale wildfires.

Out of state deployments give Forest Rangers the training to combat large wildfires and also manage large incidents using the Incident Command System. The program is essential to maintain wildland fire qualifications and expertise here at home.

Forest Ranger salaries and all associated costs are entirely reimbursed when working out of state. Wildland engines and crews bring federal dollars back into the budget. The out of state fire program needs to be expanded to keep Forest Rangers on the cutting edge of Wildland Firefighting.

20 Year Retirement

I want to discuss the most pressing issue impacting the Forest Ranger Force - parity and equity with respect to retirement benefits. As you are aware, the vast majority of police titles in NYS and the nation have a 20-year retirement plan. In fact only 4% of police officers in the police and fire retirement system do not. The same is true of paid structural fire fighters.

The vast majority can retire with 20 years on. Our closest counterpart in the federal system is the National Park Law Enforcement Rangers who are police, fight wildland fires and conduct search and rescue missions in exactly the same fashion we do. A number of NPS rangers work right here in the State of New York. NPS Rangers enjoy a 20-year retirement with a mandatory retirement age of 57. We are simply not competitive with our counterparts.

Forest Rangers do a job that combines police duties with wildland fire fighting and emergency response. In other words, we are required to work in both worlds and be exposed to risk from both worlds.

Our members operate in environments of extreme stress for many days on end. The physical demands are high, wear and tear on joints is high, exposure to smoke and other toxins are high. Not surprisingly, the rate of injury is also high in Forest Rangers because of the work we do. When compared to other titles, Forest Rangers have the highest rate of injury in the DEC.

In order to become a Forest Ranger only select science-based degree programs qualify you for taking the civil service test. A Forest Ranger exits the academy after 28 weeks of training with all

DCJS police requirements as well as the specialized training needed to be a Forest Ranger.

All the comparable titles with 20-year retirement fall well below the educational requirements to become a Forest Ranger. In addition they spend less time in an academy setting.

The State of New York needs to be looking ahead to ensure there is a plentiful and diverse pool of applicants to take the Forest Ranger Exam. To that end, I believe it is essential to offer a competitive retirement plan that is comparable to other police and professional firefighters in the State of New York and across the nation. Forest Rangers need to have 20-year retirement. The people of New York State deserve Forest Rangers chosen from the very best we have to offer. In order to do that this state must at least offer the industry standard in police and fire retirement.

Search and Rescue Missions

Forest Rangers are part of the communities where we live and part of the larger community of people who share the same love of the outdoors. We are proud of the many diverse ways we serve this community, but our hundreds of life-saving search and rescue missions rank paramount.

Rangers often need to be lowered from helicopters, use chainsaws, stay interior for days at a time, set up communication relays, manage multiple resources, use advanced land navigation and search in extreme terrain. If you find yourself lost or seriously injured, there is no substitute for a well-trained, equipped, and experienced Forest Ranger.

This past year was no exception. We had many occasions where Forest Rangers were responding to multiple rescues, searches and recoveries all at once. Forest Rangers are never required or compensated to be on-call but always rally to handle these incidents, coming in from days off and leaving family functions to be there. These incidents come when least expected and Rangers have always risen to the occasion.

Looking back at the year, there are always a few rescues that stick out in your mind. This spring, on the day 38 new Rangers were arriving at the academy there were a few rangers that had searched through the night on Giant Mt. for a missing climber. Two Rangers located him. He had fallen while climbing and dragged himself down a drainage with two broken legs.

Rangers rendered medical care, packaged the patient, built a trail to him, and began a treacherous carryout. At the same time a call came in that there was a heart attack on another peak. Rangers hastily made a plan and left one rescue to respond to what would become a tragic fatality. Weather changed and the helicopter became an option before the days end. Two high stakes incidents were resolved in true Forest Ranger fashion.

What has made that day especially memorable for me is that Forest Ranger Captain Chris Kostoss was on scene that day managing resources, moving equipment and coordinating with aviation. He was in his element, handling it with the good humor and attitude Chris was known for. So many of us had been on countless searches, rescues, fires, and other incidents with Chris over the years.

Chris was always a person we were happy to see. For a lot of us that would be the last time we would see our friend Chris alive. Sadly, about a week later Chris took his life while on duty.

Chris had been a Forest Ranger for 22 years. He struggled with depression and mental illness in a job that makes those things harder. Chris wanted to retire and he needed to retire. I believe that Chris had earned the right to retire. If he had that ability it may have changed things for Chris, his family, and for his Ranger family.

Conclusion

We have met with many of you to explain these critical issues. We have made it our career and calling to help people in their hour of need. Today we are asking for your help. In this budget, please include a 20-year retirement for the members of the PBANYS. We need it now more than ever. Please help us complete this mission.