



**ADIRONDACK
COUNCIL** PRESERVING WATER,
AIR AND WILDLANDS

**Testimony of the Adirondack Council at the
Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the Environmental Conservation
Portion of the Executive Budget Proposal for Fiscal Year 2024-2025**

February 7, 2024

Good afternoon, Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein and honored legislators. My name is Kevin Chlad, and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Adirondack Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify for this public hearing.

For almost 50 years, the Adirondack Council has been the largest environmental advocacy group working solely to protect the ecological integrity and wild character of the six-million-acre Adirondack Park and broader North Country region. Based in Elizabethtown, NY (30 miles east of Lake Placid), the Council champions an Adirondack Park that seamlessly integrates private and public lands, is renowned for its clean water, air and globally significant wilderness areas, is surrounded by working farms and forests, and supports safe, accessible, and vibrant local communities. To protect the Adirondacks, the Council uses the best science to guide regional decision making and a deep knowledge of the political landscape in Albany and the North Country to educate, inform, and motivate the public and those who make public policy. The Council believes wild places are a powerful connector for visitors and residents alike and help make the iconic Park a national treasure, now and for future generations.

The Adirondack Council is a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organization and we do not accept any state grants.

We offer the following testimony in response to the Governor's Executive Budget proposal for the 2024-2025 fiscal year.

About the Adirondack Park

The Adirondack Park is a national treasure, and we have it right here in upstate New York. **At 6.1 million acres, it is the largest park in the contiguous United States. The Park itself is ecologically significant in that it is the largest intact temperate forest in the entire world.** With over 2,800 lakes and ponds, and 1,500 miles of rivers that are fed by an estimated 30,000 miles of brooks and streams, the Adirondacks are an important source of clean water. Its large wilderness landscapes are a refuge for wildlife, people and a powerful tool in sequestering greenhouse gases.

The Park is a patchwork of public and private lands, with slightly more than half in private ownership and the remainder consisting of ‘forever wild’ Forest Preserve lands, protected by our state’s constitution. The protection of millions of acres state land is something New Yorkers must never take for granted. The Adirondack Park Agency (APA), led by an eleven-member board, provides oversight of the administration of the Forest Preserve, and is also responsible for long-range planning of private lands in the Park. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is tasked with the care and custody of our Forest Preserve and protection for those who use these lands for hunting, fishing, respite, and recreation. With roughly 130,000 year-round residents in more than 100 communities, the Park is a source of business and culture as well: arts, craft making, sports, hunting and fishing, farming, forestry, and other entrepreneurial efforts that merge with the Park’s spectacular setting to create a place that is truly special.

Ensuring the Adirondacks benefit all New Yorkers

Every single New Yorker is a co-owner and co-protector of the “forever wild” forest preserve, and thus entrusted with every decision concerning parkland alienation through our state constitution. New York’s Executive Law §801 has established a vested interest for all New Yorkers in preserving a park-like aesthetic across both public and private lands in the Adirondacks.

As the largest temperate forest in the world, the Adirondacks will play a prominent role in achieving the state’s newly codified “30 x 30” goal. Natural climate solutions are an essential piece of the puzzle for New York to achieve climate justice. **Highly populated regions of our state face the specter of severe flooding and storm impacts if we do not successfully address climate chaos. Large forested regions, the biggest of which are found in the Adirondacks, will retain water and absorb greenhouse gases.** This will slow climate change and associated impacts if we take the necessary steps to protect and leverage these important assets.

There are many opportunities to act this year in the interest of fostering diversity, equity, inclusivity and justice for all to benefit from the Adirondacks. There are also important opportunities this year for the Adirondacks to aid our state’s efforts to combat climate change. Some progress has been made, but we urge the legislature to continue efforts to reclaim the Adirondack Park and ensure that it benefits all New Yorkers.

Fighting Climate Change and Protecting Clean Air for Disadvantaged Communities

Water quality data collected in the Adirondack Park has played a critical role in protecting the lungs of residents living in frontline communities for decades. That data has also aided in the development of groundbreaking clean air policies and court actions against upwind polluters. This has resulted in greater protections against acid rain, smog, ozone, and greenhouse gases. New York has begun to invest in 21st

century science that serves a similar role in fighting climate change, but more funding is needed. **The Adirondack Park is the ideal destination for this work because its protections and distance from point source pollution offer a controlled environment that allows researchers to isolate air pollution and climate impacts in a way that other regions of this state and country cannot.**

A consortium of non-profit partners and top academic institutions in New York State have come together to design a multi-year, 21st century water quality survey that has great potential to guide climate policy just as the Adirondack lakes survey of the 1980's did for the fight against acid rain. This project is known as a Survey of Climate and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems (SCALE). Among many things, this study will examine carbon and methane cycling, storage potential and prediction methods for freshwater. Researchers will also examine how climate change impacts baseline conditions of waterbodies, including temperature, dissolved oxygen, and the duration/ length of seasonal stratification. Scientists will explore the relationships between climate change and harmful algal blooms, food web attributes, cold water fisheries, and mercury bioaccumulation.

The consortium uses cutting edge research techniques such as eDNA collection/analysis, remote sensing, fluorescence and more. This data is expected to provide immense benefit to state agencies in the development of future climate policymaking, and provide critical information that will guide strategic investment of greenhouse gas reduction and climate resiliency initiatives.

Governor Hochul and the legislature funded this survey with an initial \$500,000 in the FY 22-23 budget, which allowed researchers to pilot the SCALE project in 2023. Data from the pilot study is being analyzed and will aid in the refinement of the larger study of roughly 400 waterbodies. Governor Hochul and the legislature funded this survey with an additional \$2 million in the FY23-24 budget, which is expected to launch the project into the field for its first year with six partnering institutions and two teams of field researchers collecting data on roughly one-third of the total waterbodies to be sampled. With the full-sized study launching in 2024, the academic community is taking a leap of faith, believing that New York state will commit to fully funding this very important work.

The Governor has proposed to cut the SCALE appropriation from her FY 24-25 executive budget, putting the future of this project in peril. Please stand up for climate science, and include a *\$3 million appropriation in the FY 24-25 Budget for the Ausable River Association, Cornell CALS, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and academic partners to conduct a Survey of Climate change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems (SCALE).*

Protecting Wilderness while Fostering Equitable Access in the Adirondacks

More than 12 million visitors come to the Adirondack Park each year, marking a dramatic increase in use in the last decade. Most visitors will enjoy time on the state-owned “forever wild” Forest Preserve, to enjoy hiking, boating, or one of many other recreational opportunities supported on these lands. Even more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has led New Yorkers to be outdoors to experience for their mental health and to seek safe experiences with their friends and family. While there is reason to celebrate the exceptional popularity of the Forest Preserve, there is also reason for concern.

Overuse of the “Forever Wild” forest preserve has led to widespread impacts to the natural resources, visitor safety, and the wilderness experience. Additionally, access to the Forest Preserve is essentially a privilege afforded to those who have access to private transportation. Public transportation is largely non-existent. Park visitation is predominantly white and demands further exploration into whether or not we have adequately fostered access opportunities for New Yorkers in the farthest-flung corners of our state.

The DEC’s High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group (HPAG) issued recommendations [in a 2021 report](#) to address the impacts of overuse for the High Peaks Region, the headwaters of the Hudson River. The state has implemented a selection of those recommendations. Recent completed actions include the deployment of trailhead and summit stewards and educators, additional porta john facilities, closing dangerously-located parking lots, and establishing a limited hiker shuttle.

Following the FY 22-23 appropriation of \$600,000 in the Environmental Protection Fund for a Visitor Use Management Framework (VUMF) for the High Peaks Region in the Adirondacks, and Kaaterskill Clove in the Catskills. The work is underway, and holds promise to modernize the way our state manages all of its public lands in the future. The [VUMF](#) will use national expertise to guide a state transition to adaptive recreation management, an iterative 21st century approach that sets land management goals, establishes “threshold indicators,” and ongoing data collection to drive decision making. The VUMF is already in use at all of our most popular national parks.

We must not wait for the first VUMF on the forest preserve to be tested before we embark in an effort to expand this work to other parts of the Park. As with hiking, mountain biking and other land-based recreation, there was an increase in paddling, boating and other water-based recreation during the pandemic that has persisted. The first VUMF will be tested in regions that offer a plethora of land-based recreational uses, but few-if-any water-based recreational uses. **We urge the legislature to work with Governor Hochul to dedicate \$1 million for a carrying capacity study, which have been required under the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan for over fifty years but never developed.** Such an effort would aid the state in designing strategies to enhance safe boating, protect diminishing shorelines from erosion, and safeguard sensitive aquatic species from avoidable encounters with the recreating public.

We were pleased to see that the FY 23-24 budget included \$8 million for Adirondack/Catskill Wilderness Stewardship and Visitor Safety. While we are grateful that Governor Hochul proposed “up to” \$8 million in the budget for this program, this language creates the potential for the state to spend much less than that. This funding supports trailhead educators who teach “Leave No Trace” ethics, trail repair projects, and prevention of human waste runoff. **We urge the legislature to work with Governor Hochul to strike the “up to” language in the Executive Budget Proposal, and appropriate \$10 million in support of stewardship programs in the Adirondacks and Catskills.**

Lastly, as we work to restore the wilderness character of landscapes such as the High Peaks Wilderness, it is important to recognize that these efforts are entirely consistent with the goals of fostering equity in public lands access. **Proactive visitor use management, done correctly, is our best hope to bring equity to public lands access and restore wilderness character (solitude, peace, tranquility) to Forest Preserve lands.**

The Timbuctoo Climate and Careers Institute

The fight for climate, environmental, and social justice demands that as we fight climate change, we better connect the Adirondack Park with communities living on the frontlines of climate impacts across the state. We celebrate that New York’s Adirondack Park was a cradle of the early fight for Black suffrage. In that same spirit of opportunity, the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Institute (SCCI) introduces high school students to a broad spectrum of green job opportunities, fostering the next generation of environmental stewards and climate advocates. The first year of this program was a great success, with the SUNY school of Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers hosting 41 students from the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn. The program sees an opportunity to grow stronger in the coming year, while working within its existing budget framework. We encourage you to fund the Timbuctoo Summer Climate and Careers Institute at \$2.1 million once again this year.

Governor Hochul has proposed to cut the Timbuctoo SCCI in her FY 24-25 Executive Budget. The Adirondack Council urges the legislature to reject the Governor’s proposal and include \$2.1 million for this systemic partnership between the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers College.

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative

[Adirondack Diversity Initiative](#) (ADI) works to make the Adirondack region more welcoming to and inclusive of everyone. Additionally, ADI works to make the Adirondack region relevant to and supported by an increasingly diverse New York State and American population. ADI provides important anti-bias

training services to the NYS Rangers and Environmental Conservation Officers, and would like to grow that program. ADI benefited from a \$420,000 appropriation in the Aid-to-Localities last year. Currently, its impact far exceeds reasonable expectations for any entity operating with a grant of this size. **The Governor proposed to cut ADI from \$420,000 to \$300,000 in her Executive Budget this year. Adirondack Council supports ADI's request to restore its allocation to \$420,000 in this year's budget, in response to the growing impact and reach of this highly effective program.**

Environmental Protection Fund

For more than 30 years, the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) has served as the cornerstone of the environmental portion of the capital projects budget. The Adirondack Park was the poster child for the creation of the EPF, with images of Adirondack waters and wildlands compelling state policymakers to act more than three decades ago. Governor Hochul has proposed to keep the EPF at \$400 million this year, but has swept \$25 million of those funds to pay for operational expenses such as agency staff time. **The Adirondack Council opposes the Governor's budget language that allows \$25 million to be used for staffing related expenses as such language would greatly undermine the ability of this fund to leverage maximum conservation impact for the many communities it serves across the state.**

The Adirondack Council believes the Environmental Protection Fund should include the following:

- **Increase the open space protection category to \$50 million, with \$3 million for the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) Conservation Partnership Program and \$1.5 million for the LTA Conservation Easement Program**
- **\$20 million for invasive species prevention and eradication**
- **\$900,000 for the Lake George Park Commission**
- **\$1 million for Visitors Centers, including the SUNY School of Environmental Science and Forestry, Paul Smith's College, and the High Peaks Information Center**
- **\$600,000, to be divided equally for the Adirondack Watershed Institute at Paul Smith's College to conduct Harmful Algal Bloom Research, for the Atmospheric Sciences Research Center at Whiteface Mountain Field Station for Trace Gas Monitoring and Cloud Collection, and for the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies.**

Preserving Clean Water and Promoting Community Vibrancy

The Adirondack Park has aging clean water and wastewater infrastructure. The impacts are far-reaching – from closed beaches to impaired trout streams to harmful algae blooms. Small Adirondack communities host large seasonal influxes of visitors, including vacation rentals that stress these aging systems further, especially impacting the shores of our Adirondack lakes. Investments in water infrastructure constitute one of the most pivotal investments the state can make in protecting Adirondack waters while promoting new business and affordable housing in Adirondack Park hamlets. Since 2016, New York State has invested close to \$100 million in grants for clean water infrastructure

projects for communities in the Adirondack Park region, but the need is far greater, currently exceeding a \$200 million backlog of wastewater treatment plants and sewer system projects in over a dozen communities. In her State of the State address, Governor Hochul announced that the Environmental Facilities Corp will lift its administrative cap on clean water grants from 25% to 50% of the eligible project cost. While the Adirondack Council applauds this change, we are concerned with the Governor's proposed reduction in clean water spending, cutting the clean water infrastructure act appropriation from \$500 million to \$250 million. The effect of this change in spending means that clean water projects will become less affordable for New Yorkers.

Clean water infrastructure grants are essential for these communities in the Adirondacks with lower median household incomes and limited user bases to cover local cost shares. **We request \$600 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act (CWIA) this year to help not only our state-wide needs but also address these critical needs in the Adirondack region.** We also encourage federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law clean water grants and newly established NYS Bond Act funding to supplement these needs so all projects in the Adirondacks can be affordable for rural and hardship communities.

Furthermore, greater investment and eligibility is needed for NYS State Septic System Replacement Fund to assist residents who have septic systems on Adirondack Lakes. The vast majority of wastewater controls surrounding these water bodies are decentralized and managed through homeowners' septic systems. Many of these systems are outdated and failing, costing tens of thousands of dollars to replace. Setting aside additional funds through the Clean Water Infrastructure Act for the Septic System Replacement Fund, which can provide up to 50% of remediation costs, will go a long way to help Adirondack Lakes remain healthy.

Thank you again for your time today and for considering our testimony. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions:

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