



**Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the Transportation
Portion of the Executive Budget Proposal for Fiscal Year 2024-2025
*January 24, 2024***

Greetings Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, Chair Kennedy, Chair Magnarelli and honored legislators. My name is Sawyer Bailey, and I am the Executive Director of AdkAction. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing.

AdkAction is a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organization dedicated to solving problems to help people and nature thrive together in the Adirondack Park. We strive to enhance the social, economic, and cultural life of local residents while conserving the long term natural resources of the Park. We offer the following testimony in response to the transportation portion of the Governor's Executive Budget proposal for the 2024-2025 fiscal year.

Road salt pollution is affecting New York families, farmers, drivers, and futures.

Clean water and safe roads – that is what we are all striving for, and it's that delicate balance which I am here to speak with you about today. Clean water, safe roads is also the formal name of AdkAction's efforts in sustainable winter road management, contextualizing the twin charge our leaders, lawmakers, agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and citizens are tasked with on a daily basis. Unfortunately, groundwater pollution from winter road salt has already significantly affected our state's vegetation and aquatic ecosystems, compromised the health of our residents, created undue homeowner expense, and jeopardized property and equipment values. We may be speaking about the budget for a single agency, but this is a matter that cuts to the very core of our State's values, our duty of care for our citizens, and our duty to manage our state's financial and intrinsic resources.

In 2019, AdkAction collaborated on a study led by Paul Smith's College Adirondack Watershed Institute testing 489 private wells. 64% had sodium levels exceeding the Environmental Protection Agency federally recommended limit. Contamination levels were highest in wells downslope of state highways. In some cases we saw salt levels akin to brackish water estuaries at 1000 ppm in groundwater resources.

In the 13 years AdkAction has been working towards road salt reduction, I have had the opportunity to meet many of the New Yorkers whose lives are devastated by the impacts of oversalting. I have shook hands with generational dairy farmers who can no longer afford to keep their family's herd because of salty well water, and have been forced to find new ways to make ends meet. Unfortunately, you can't buy bottled water for a herd of dairy cattle. I have met people who loved the Adirondacks so much that they decided to purchase a home and move their family here, only to find their well's elevated salt content had made it unsafe to bathe their kids in their home's bathtub. They were forced to install and maintain a costly reverse osmosis system at their own expense. They are still paying it off. I have spoken with longtime Adirondack residents who have made the drive to a roadside spring every other day for a

decade to fill plastic bottles for drinking and cooking because their well water was contaminated by salt. I have met a couple whose well was contaminated by salt, and with the State found liable, had two new wells drilled: both of which were found to have emerging salt contamination. For each one of those families, there are dozens more who discovered their dishwasher and washing machine fixtures were prematurely rusting, that their health is declining with hypertension or chronic disease, and that their cars are depreciating more quickly than ever before, all because of salt runoff from state roadways.

While they are not seated here beside me, their burdens are here with us in the room today, and we must not overlook them. Road salt pollution is a multifaceted issue – economic, social, and ecological - but it is also an environmental justice issue: concentrating burdens on rural, impoverished New Yorkers with the least ability to pay. Not to mention that when plumbing pipes and fixtures containing lead corrode, the lead can dissolve or flake into the water that flows from our faucets. You can't see, smell, or taste lead, but even water that runs clear can contain it.

AdkAction and our Adirondack partners are piloting cost saving measures, and we can scale those methods:

For years, AdkAction and its many collaborators have taken an entrepreneurial approach to pursue solutions in the Adirondack Park, and we have piloted fiscally responsible interventions ready to bring to scale. Since 2022, we have advanced a robust regional strategy for road salt reduction, building on the successful models championed by the Town of Hague.

AdkAction and its Clean Water Safe Roads Network helps 26+ North Country and Adirondack Park town and county highway departments reduce their use of road salt, by empowering superintendents and their crews operator best management practices training, 1-1 technical assistance training, and opportunities for shared problem solving and camaraderie. We have seen practical, safe salt reduction take hold in just two winters while controlling departmental costs and maintaining operator take-home pay.

One outstanding example is the Town of Peru, just north of the Adirondack Park. Peru has switched from a traditional salt/sand mixture, to pre-treating each of its routes with salt brine, melting snow and ice on contact, and has transitioned its conventional plow blades to segmented, or, "live edge" plows, which move with the road to lift more snow and ice material, meaning less salt required to melt the rest. Coupled with an elimination of sand, these practices have yielded \$70,000 savings and a roughly 50% chloride reduction per winter.

Surprisingly, we have observed changes in crew camaraderie, as crews engaged in road salt reduction with the Clean Water, Safe Roads Network reported that this initiative brought their teams together in new ways. By engaging stakeholders who are often rendered invisible: the plow operators who work when most of us sleep, quietly keeping our towns and villages functioning, we elevate their lived experiences, their expertise, and their role in solutions. I believe our State can do the same, empowering our State roadway managers to do better for our shared communities and do more to safeguard waste from our taxpayer dollars.

Governor Hochul's state operations budget proposal for fiscal year 2024-25 includes \$151,965,000 for the Department of Transportation to spend on supplies and materials, "[f]or the payment of costs of snow and ice control on state highways and preventive maintenance on state roads and bridges as defined in paragraph (a) of subdivision 1 of section 10-d of the highway law." (line 55 of page 655, FY '25 State Operations Budget S.8300/A.8800) Given the financial challenges we face this budget cycle as New Yorkers, this is a perfect opportunity to discuss meaningful road salt reduction strategies, so that we use

only what we need, reducing waste, and the hidden tax and very real economical burden imposed on New Yorkers. For an agency that must be concerned with the “triple bottom line” (social, environmental, and economic profits), road salt reduction opportunities represent a win-win-win.

Incorporating Practical Solutions from the Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report Recommendations:

The State’s Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report released last September providing an assessment of the scope and scale of road salt pollution impacts in the Adirondack Park region, as well as a menu of options state and local road managers can take to reduce road salt pollution while maintaining safe roadways. The Adirondacks are the canary in the coal mine when it comes to road salt pollution, but the road salt reduction strategies proposed in the report provide a road map for our entire state to reduce its use.

As someone who has seen twenty towns and counties implement reductions without cost burden, I can tell you that significant reductions can be achieved through the implementation of the seven primary task force recommendations:

1. Scale up well-known snow and ice removal practices that reduce overall salt use while maintaining current levels of service for the driving public;
2. Establish and carry out uniform best management practice training for winter road managers statewide, and consider advancing legislation to limit liability for road managers when best management practices are followed. Similar legislation has been approved in other states.
3. Adopt water quality standards for chloride and sodium, and implement road salt reduction targets;
4. Expand existing funding for salt reduction programs and implement a “return on investment” approach to scale up the deployment of modern low-salt equipment;
5. Track salt applications at state, local and private levels, collect a robust water quality data set, and make data on its use publicly accessible;
6. Establish a process for remediating the contamination of residential drinking water.
7. Create an outreach and awareness campaign to strengthen public understanding of salt use and its risks to the environment and human health. This fall AdkAction launched a pilot public awareness campaign to provide approachable, science communication regarding road salt pollution and prevention to Adirondack residents and visitors, and engagement has been positive, assuring us that there is a broad base of support from state residents behind this sea change.

Though not included in the final version of the 2023 report, a number of task force members, along with a coalition of salt reduction advocates, recommend that the state implement the following measures at the same time:

- **Establish a framework for accountability:** (1) Pass legislation establishing a statewide interagency council and advisory committee, following the model set forth by the New York State Invasive Species Council and Advisory Committee, to serve as a dedicated body guiding the implementation of the Task Force Report’s recommendations. (2) Create a dedicated “salt czar”

staff position in the Governor's office to lend support and accountability for the Council, DOT and partnering agencies, for such an interconnected and complex issue.

Develop an Action and Implementation Plan for Report recommendations: For the next six years (2024 - 2030), there are immediate and sustained long-term efforts that will be necessary to make progress implementing Task Force recommendations. Currently, no timeline exists for the fulfillment of report recommendations, including salt-reduction targets. The earliest phases of the road salt reduction pilots are now underway, but at the same time, a broader and more robust plan for future seasons must be developed in the next ten months in preparation for the next winter season (2024-2025). This kind of effective, pragmatic planning takes time and must begin soon.

Fund Salt Reductions Using Savings: Salt is a very expensive product, and salt use reductions will alleviate pressures on state and local budgets while reducing pollution.

The Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report offers a path for the state Department of Transportation to take in reducing road salt pollution statewide. This should save state dollars in the years to come, if done right. The model established by the Town of Hague can be scaled to meet the needs of the traveling public across our state if we commit ourselves to the cause.

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