



CATSKILLCENTER

Testimony of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (Catskill Center),
Joint Legislative Public Hearing, Environmental Conservation Portion of the 2024-2025
Executive Budget Proposal, February 7, 2024

The **Catskill Forest Preserve Park** offers the natural, cultural, and historical significance of a National Park just two hours from the largest population center in the country. Few other places contain so much protected and undisturbed land so close to so many millions of people.

The Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks collectively represent more than 6.5 million acres of land which is nearly **a quarter of New York State**. The Catskill and Adirondack regions serve as home and recreation lands to over one million residents in Forest Preserve counties. In addition, there are more than 25 million visitors to the Catskills and Adirondacks each year bringing \$3 billion to regional economies annually. In our current climate crisis, the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks serve as the lungs of NY, a great force to combat climate change as its forests provide oxygen and sequester carbon. They protect critical habitat, and provide **fresh drinking water to millions of residents, including 90% of the New York City's water supply from within the Catskills region**.

In September of 2023, Catskill Center, Catskill Mountainkeeper and the 25 Catskill groups and municipalities, who represent the **Catskill Park Coalition**, signed on to a letter to Governor Hochul celebrating gains for the **Catskill Park, including funding for the Catskill Park priorities and the \$8m in dedicated funds for the Catskills and Adirondacks**, along with making specific requests for continued support of the Catskill Park and its communities.

In November of 2023, Catskill Center, ADK, Catskill Mountainkeeper, and **44 Adirondack and Catskill groups and municipalities** signed on to a letter to Governor Hochul highlighting the historic commitment to the \$400 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), and passage and roll-out of the \$4.2 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act. The letter **celebrated last year's final budget and the \$8 million in dedicated funds for the Catskills and Adirondacks** within the nearly \$50 million of State Land Stewardship funding in the Environmental Protection Fund's (EPF) Parks and Recreation Account **and requested this line again at \$10 million**.

Retain and Restore Dedicated Catskill and Adirondack Stewardship Funding

We thank the Senate and the Assembly for your leadership and commitment in providing at least \$10 million in dedicated stewardship funds for the Catskills and Adirondacks **in one-house budget bills** and for fighting for the dedicated funding line which has been \$8 million in the final budget for the past two years.

This funding has been an important step toward meeting the vision outlined by the Catskill Park and Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Groups (CAG and HPAG), to protect

wilderness, provide safe and welcoming visitor experiences, and to invest in Catskill and Adirondack communities. Projects are now being implemented with this funding including the expansion of trail work, more educational stewards, improvements to recreation infrastructure (e.g., trailheads, parking, and water access), projects to improve inclusivity and accessibility, ecological monitoring, and Visitor Use Management (VUM) planning and implementation.

This year, for the first time, Governor Hochul has included \$8 million of the requested \$10 million in dedicated stewardship funding in her Executive Budget Proposal. However, the language used is “up to \$8 million,” which leaves the line open to being significantly less than that amount.

Please restore this critical line to \$10 million in FY 24-25 with language that protects the dedicated stewardship funding for the Forest Preserve. The final budget the past two years has used the following: “for Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety and wilderness protection activities to address issues relating to overuse.” **Please strike the “up to” provision in the Executive Budget Proposal, and once again allocate \$10 million to support stewardship programs in the Catskills and Adirondacks.**

Stewardship Funding	Senate/Assembly 2024 One-House	2024 Final Budget	2025 Exec Proposal	Request
Adirondack and Catskill Visitor Safety and Wilderness Protection	10 mil/10mil	\$8 million	“up to \$8 million for Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety and wilderness protection activities to address issues relating to overuse”	“\$10 million for Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety and wilderness protection activities to address issues relating to overuse”

Retain and Restore Funding for Forest Preserve Visitor Centers

Visitor Centers currently welcome visitors, address stewardship, and promote communities in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks. These facilities are strategically located and attract visitors traveling to popular areas. Continued funding of these strategic centers, which rely heavily on private fundraising, is critical as they serve to protect the Forest Preserve, keep recreators safe, educate youth and the public, and highlight community assets. In the EPF, **please continue your support of the following Visitor Centers at \$250,000 each**, including the Catskill Center’s Congressman Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center, Adirondack Mountain Club Visitor and Information Centers, Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center, and SUNY ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center.

Visitor Center	Senate/Assembly 2024 One-House	2024 Final Budget	2025 Exec Proposal	Request
Adirondack Mountain Club High Peaks Information Center	\$100,000/\$100,000	\$100,000	\$0	\$250,000

Catskill Center Congressman Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center	\$300,000/\$200,000	\$200,000	\$200,000	\$250,000
Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center	\$225,000/\$250,000	\$250,000	\$250,000	\$250,000
SUNY ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center	\$150,000/\$250,000	\$250,000	\$250,000	\$250,000

Thanks to the work of the Senate and Assembly these Visitor Centers have been able to provide essential infrastructure for the Forest Preserve. They serve as the starting destinations for more and more visits to the region, helping visitors find information about recreation and events, and helping connect them with local communities. The Catskills and Adirondack Visitor Centers **are a year-round resource** for hikers, backpackers, snowshoers, and cross-country skiers, providing trip planning, weather reports, trail conditions, maps, guidebooks, and gear for rent or purchase to ensure recreators have safe, enjoyable adventures.

The Visitor Centers are **staffed year-round with Leave No Trace educators** and experienced outdoor recreationists. For many visitors to the Catskills and Adirondacks, their interaction with staff at the Visitor Centers is their only opportunity to engage with a knowledgeable authority on the Adirondack or Catskill Park. The Visitor Center properties have recreational facilities with **accessible features** including trails, campsites, picnic areas, interpretive displays, and restrooms. **Educational programming created by and offered at the centers reach students k-12 as well as at the undergraduate and graduate collegiate levels.** Collectively the centers work with schools from all of NY State's 62 counties, and support visiting classes from all of New England and across the Northeast and Canada.

The Visitor Centers host **skills workshops and training courses.** They educate youth and the public. They also provide **flush toilet bathroom facilities,** as well as additional summer porta-jons which reduce the pressure on backcountry privies and the impacts of improperly disposed of human waste. The Visitor Centers **provide essential preventative search and rescue (PSAR) education** to help avoid preventable rescues by an already overstressed Forest Ranger force. When hikers get lost or injured, they also can serve as **a base for NYS Forest Rangers** who coordinate Search and Rescue events.

With well over **100,000 on-line social media followers,** and thousands of members, and supporters, the Visitor Centers also have **robust capacity for educational outreach** to reach people about **responsible outdoor recreation** before they leave home to travel to Catskills and Adirondacks.

Retain Funding to Fix Road to Busiest NYS Trailhead

Please also retain \$1,250,000 in the Executive Budget Proposal for the Town of North Elba in the EPF under State Land Stewardship to fix and improve Adirondack Loj Road which is the gateway to the Adirondack High Peaks and road to High Peaks Information Center at the busiest trail head in New York State. This funding will repair and resurface roadway, from Meadows Lane north toward Route 73.

Retain and Increase Funding for Science Facilities, Research and Monitoring

Sustained monitoring of the ecological vital signs of the Forest Preserve is imperative to protect the health and integrity of New York State’s treasured Catskill and Adirondack parks. Tracking these ecological indicators - biodiversity, air and water quality, and climate resilience - is essential for the well-being of the people and lands of the state of New York. Several facilities in the Catskills and Adirondacks specialize in monitoring ecological vital signs including, Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, Adirondack Watershed Institute, and the Atmospheric Sciences Research Center (ASRC) Whiteface Mountain Field Station. These facilities track pollutants in air and water, monitor weather, disseminate data to other researchers and the public, and provide inclusive opportunities for interns and research fellows. In the EPF, please support the following Science Facilities at \$200,000 each:

Science Facility	Senate/Assembly 2024 One-House	2024 Final Budget	2025 Exec Proposal	Request
Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$100,000	\$200,000
The Atmospheric Sciences Research Center (ASRC) Whiteface Mountain Field Station	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$200,000
Adirondack Watershed Institute	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$200,000

Other science and research that informs management actions is called for in both the HPAG and CAG reports, as well as in the Adirondack Vision 2050 Report. For example, **carrying capacity studies** like the one proposed for **the Saranac Lake Complex in the Adirondacks** are necessary to protect aquatic habitats. Increased support to **combat invasive species by supporting the EPF Invasives Species line** that funds Forest Preserve PRISMs, including Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program (**APIPP**), and the Catskill Regional Invasive Species Partnership (**CRISP**), and projects that partner with them such as Cornell’s **NYS Hemlock Initiative** to combat Hemlock Woolly Adelgid. And to understand the extent of climate change impacts on Adirondack lakes—habitat quality, climate sensitive species distributions, carbon accounting, and harmful algae blooms—and guide science-based management for decades to come, supporting the consortium-based Survey of Climate Change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems or **SCALE**, and **project partners such as the Ausable River Association, is essential to the future of water quality** throughout New York State.

Support Streamlining State Land Acquisition to Meet Climate Goals

We call on the Legislature for assistance in streamlining the state land acquisition process in their one-house budgets. To realize our state’s conservation and climate goals and fulfill the wishes of voters who strongly supported the Bond Act as well as the EPF, the state’s land acquisition program must be improved and streamlined. Regrettably, land protection in NY has slowed in recent years. **In 2022, DEC & NYS Parks acquired just 5,056 acres combined. Contrast that number to the historic average of 70,000 acres each year over the history of the EPF.** One immediate step that can be taken to increase the pace of land protection is to **include language in your Senate and**

Assembly Budget Proposals expressly authorizing the Real Property Bureau of the Office of Attorney General to use private title insurance as a means of achieving marketable title. Such an allowance would be consistent with common real estate practice, as well as allowable practices in virtually all other state and federal land acquisition programs. In contrast, New York State undertakes its own review of land titles, sometimes going back one hundred years or more to prove perfect title. This materially slows down transactions and open space conservation program implementation, depriving communities across the state of the benefits of these projects. In addition, these lengthy periods impact the public purse due to the accrual of additional holding costs while properties are being held by land trusts or other entities. Currently there are more than 100,000 acres valued at in excess of \$150 million pending transfer to the state.

Healthy Parks Require Healthy Communities

Unlike other state parks, Catskill and Adirondack and Forest Preserve Parks contain communities where people live, work, and raise families. These communities and their businesses are part of the fabric of the Parks, and they provide lodging, food, entertainment, and emergency services to park visitors. The **Park Towns and Villages** are integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks. As such they **need infrastructure support for quality of residential life, and for safe and enjoyable visitor experiences that help support regional economies.** In the Adirondacks, the Common Ground Alliance (CGA) and the Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages (AATV), and in the Catskills, the Catskill Park Coalition (CPC), meet annually to collaborate and develop priorities on whole park issues that include the needs of communities within the park as well as recreation and ecological concerns. **Smart Growth Grant and other EPF funding should be increased** and coupled with other investments such as Bond Act funding to update infrastructure in Forest Preserve Park communities. Funding should support clean water, promote affordable housing, and infrastructure projects such as trails, community development, and scenic byways. We also urge **the adoption and funding of recommendations of the New York Upstate Cellular Coverage Task Force.** Significant gaps in cellular and broadband coverage in the Catskills and Adirondacks create not only health and safety risks, but also magnify limited economic and educational opportunities. **Funding should also be retained for Historic sites** that draw thousands of visitors to communities each year **such as Camp Santanoni**, and the network of historic fire towers and Park sites with **friends' groups who are funded by Parks and Trails NY EPF stewardship grants.** It is also essential to **support programs and opportunities in Park communities that will build capacity in DEIJ**, such as the work of the **Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI)**, the **Timbuctoo Pipeline Summer Climate and Careers Institute**, the **SUNY ESF Center for Native Peoples and the Environment**, and the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All** report.

Support Agency Staff

Projects cannot be implemented without staff. While we understand the current hiring challenges, we urge focusing on critical positions and exploring ways to streamline and support the hiring and retention of staff, and to create more efficiency and flexibility within the system. **Agency partners, especially those helping DEC meet their mission in the Forest Preserve are also being impacted by the failure to fund sufficient agency staff at DEC and other departments and agencies that work with contracted partners.** Non-profit partners who rely on members and donors to support programs and who multiply the impact of state funding by raising private funds are frequently impacted by delays in contracting and payment.

We are especially concerned about insufficient staffing levels in the Division of Lands and Forests. In 1996, there were 186 staff responsible for managing a total of 3,818,983 acres of public land. Today there are 170 staff who are responsible for 4,950,000 acres of public land and conservation easements. Also, during this time, three critical new programs were added: 1) climate change; 2) invasive species; and 3) conservation easements. Simultaneously, recreational use has

doubled. **Acres and workload are up, and staff is down;** staff numbers in the Division of Lands and Forests should be increased. Also adding staff in the Division of Operations would **support the 55 state public campgrounds** in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks and **increase DEC's dedicated trail crews.** DEC should also add **seasonal recreational facilities coordinators** to ensure timely completion of workplans and other project elements, and to better coordinate with volunteers. **Staff support for the DEC Accessibility Program is also needed** to develop and implement a comprehensive accessibility policy with robust trainings, technical consultations and field assessments with land managers, public outreach, maintenance of accessibility information for the public, and ADA-transition planning which helps with the removal of physical barriers that prevent program accessibility for people with disabilities.

We are pleased that the Governor has **supported the New York State Forest Ranger force** with their own Ranger Academy and 40 slots for new recruits in 2022 and that they also have support and are preparing for another **Forest Ranger academy in 2024** to stay ahead of attrition due to promotions and retirements. The Forest Ranger force is a critical piece of Forest Preserve recreation infrastructure. When people get lost or injured on the Forest Preserve, the Forest Rangers are there to get them safely back home. In maintaining the recruitment and retention of Rangers we also ask that you recognize these crucial members of the New York State Police Forces by **supporting their pension parity legislation that provides a uniform 20-year pension for all New York State Police forces.** In our current unpredictable climate where excessive heat and drought fuel wildfires, Forest Rangers are also New York State's **first line of defense against large destructive wildfires** that could decimate the Catskill and Adirondack Parks. Supporting the Forest Rangers in **this effort should be a part of a well-planned climate initiative.**

The **Adirondack Park Agency is tasked with long-range planning for 20% of the state of New York.** It is a model for planning agencies across the country and the world. We request that you continue to support the agency so that they can fill open positions to **come back up to a fully staffed level.**

Thank you for your work and leadership in caring for the great State of New York and the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks. We appreciate your attention to these important requests.

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Since 1969, the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (Catskill Center) has been dedicated to preserving and promoting the unique natural, cultural, and recreational resources of the Catskills. Our focus on conservation, community, and connection drives our efforts to create a vibrant future for the Catskills through education, collaboration, and advocacy. We believe that the Catskills are a vital part of New York State's history and identity, and we work to ensure that this unique landscape and its communities are protected for future generations. We recognize the importance of supporting and growing the local economy in a way that is environmentally responsible. We are committed to providing educational resources and programming that helps people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities learn about and appreciate the natural world. We also work closely with local businesses, community organizations, and government agencies to promote thoughtful development and land use practices. Through our efforts, we hope to inspire a deep love and respect for the Catskills and its unique ecological, cultural, and recreational offerings. We are committed to being a strong voice for the Catskills as we work to create a bright future for this special place.