



**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 2025-2026**

January 28, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, Chair Harckham, Chair Glick, and honored legislators. My name is Kevin Chlad, and I am the Deputy Director for the Adirondack Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this public hearing.

For 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 available 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 2025-2026 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 one of the largest temperate forest ecosystems left in the 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 one of the largest intact temperate forests left 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 across state lines. 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 in 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 now being summarized and will aid in the refinement of the larger study of roughly 300 waterbodies. Governor Hochul and the legislature funded this survey with an additional \$2 million in the FY23-24 budget and \$2 million more in the FY24-25 budget. This project is estimated to cost \$12 million to complete, meaning that New York's investments have gotten us close to the halfway mark. Governor Hochul has proposed to fund SCALE at \$1.5 million dollars this year. While we applaud the Governor for proposing funding for SCALE for the first time in her executive budget, this does not go far enough.

Please stand up for climate science, reject Governor Hochul's proposal, and increase the FY26 appropriation to *\$3 million for the Ausable Freshwater Center, Cornell CALS, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and academic partners to conduct a Survey of Climate change and Adirondack Lake Ecosystems (SCALE).*

The Timbuctoo Institute

The fight for climate, environmental, and social justice demands that as we fight global warming, we better connect the Adirondack Park with communities living on the frontlines of climate change 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 Institute introduces high school students to a broad spectrum of green job opportunities, fostering the next generation of environmental stewards and climate advocates. The first two years of this program were a great success, with the SUNY school of

Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers hosting a total of nearly 90 students from the five boroughs. The program sees an opportunity to grow 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 again proposed to reduce funding for the Timbuctoo Institute in her FY 25-26 Executive Budget to \$1.25 million, down from \$2.1 million in FY23 and FY24. The Adirondack Council urges the legislature to reject the Governor’s proposal and include a full \$2.1 million for this systemic partnership between the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers College.

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 participate in hiking, boating, or one of many other recreational opportunities supported on these lands. Even more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic led New Yorkers to be outdoors for their mental and physical 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 educators and summit stewards, additional porta john facilities, closing dangerously-located parking lots, and establishing a limited hiker shuttle.

A FY 22-23 appropriation of \$600,000 was approved 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](#) effort is using 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 and in some cases grown. 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 has 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 are pleased to see that the FY 25-26 budget includes \$8 million for Adirondack/Catskill Wilderness Stewardship and Visitor Safety. 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 appropriate \$12 million in support of stewardship programs in the Adirondacks and Catskills this year.**

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. The Adirondack Park Agency is proposing to amend its Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, the guiding document for the management of the “Forever Wild” forest preserve, to permit motorized Vehicles known as OPDMDs (other power driven mobility devices) on lands classified as Wilderness, Canoe, and Primitive. Lands with those classifications have already been determined by the Adirondack Park Agency to have the most sensitive ecology in the Park, and motorized uses are not currently permitted for that reason. **While we strongly support efforts to promote access to the forest preserve for people with disabilities, we believe that the Agency already has the necessary authority to do so, and we oppose their current efforts to permit motor vehicles on Wilderness, Canoe, and Primitive lands.**

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative

The [Adirondack Diversity Initiative](#) (ADI) works to make the Adirondack region more welcoming to and inclusive for 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. The**

Adirondack Council supports ADI's request to reject the Governor's proposal and 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. **The Adirondack Council urges the legislature to reject the Governor's proposal and increase the EPF to \$500 million this year.**

The Adirondack Council believes the Environmental Protection Fund should include, at a minimum, the following:

- **\$50 million for Open Space Protection, with \$3 million for the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) Conservation Partnership Program and \$1.5 million for the LTA Conservation Easement Program**
- **\$12 million for Adirondack Catskill Wilderness Protection and Visitor Safety**
- **\$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 Adirondack Mountain Club High Peaks Information Center**
- **\$1 million for the Adirondack Park Agency to administer and facilitate a carrying capacity study of waterbodies within the Adirondack Park.**
- **\$500,000 for Paul Smiths College and SUNY ESF to administer the Adirondack Park Visitor Interpretive Centers**

Preserving Clean Water and Promoting Community Vibrancy

The Adirondack Park has aging clean water infrastructure including wastewater treatment plants, sewer lines and even household septic systems. These systems threaten our lakes, rivers and streams and their impacts are far-reaching – from closed beaches to impaired trout streams to harmful algal blooms. Adirondack rural 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 more than \$194 million in grants from the Clean Water Fund for a host of clean water infrastructure projects in communities across the Adirondack Park region, leveraging \$350 million in total clean water capital project investment. While great strides have been made, from Lake George to Lake Placid, much more needs to be done. The current backlog of wastewater and sewer system needs within the Adirondack Park noted by the NYSEFC report is well over \$200 million. **We request \$600 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act (CWIA) this year to help not only our statewide needs but also to make sure adequate dollars are available for these critical needs in the Adirondack region.** We also encourage the use of the federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law clean water grants and recently established NYS Bond Act funding to supplement these needs so all projects in the Adirondacks can be affordable for rural and hardship communities whose users and residents have limited income.

Septic System pollution has also contributed to harmful algal blooms in over twenty waters bodies in the Adirondack Park in the past two years. The vast majority of wastewater controls surrounding these water bodies are decentralized and managed through homeowners' septic systems. In 2024, the NYSDEC expanded the eligibility of the Septic System Replacement Fund from a dozen to over a hundred water bodies to help address this issue and provide rural homeowners with up to \$10,000 in remediation grants. However, to truly address this challenge much greater investment is needed for the State Septic System Replacement Fund to assist residents who have septic systems on Adirondack Lakes.

For example, Warren County received around \$400,000 for this program in 2024, but their need is higher and they have a backlog of applications. And with new eligible lakes now and the successful Lake George septic system inspection program (which results generated a 50% sub-par inspection rate), several million is needed for their county alone in 2025. This story is unfolding across the Park and not only must the FY26 budget have increased funds for the Septic System Replacement Fund but Governor Hochul has yet to release this year's FY 2025 budgeted funds for this program. This must be corrected.

The Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report Recommendations: The Time for Action is Now!

The State released its long-awaited [Adirondack Park Road Salt Reduction Task Force Report](#) in September of 2023, providing an assessment of the scope and scale of road salt pollution impacts in the Adirondack Park region, as well as a menu of solutions that state and local road managers can take to reduce road salt pollution while maintaining safe roadways. **It is important to note that the road salt reduction strategies proposed in the report provide a pathway for *all of New York* to reduce road salt use, not just the Adirondacks.**

It is a hard truth that there is no clear replacement for road salt, but 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;

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:** 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 (2025-2026). 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.

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

Kevin Chlad
Deputy Director
Adirondack Council

www.AdirondackCouncil.org
kchlad@adirondackcouncil.org

Cell: 518-937-3844