



CATSKILLCENTER

**Testimony of the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (Catskill Center),  
Joint Legislative Public Hearing, Environmental Conservation Portion of the 2025-2026  
Executive Budget Proposal, January 28, 2025**

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 New York City's water supply from within the Catskills region**.

In December of 2024, the Catskill Center, Catskill Mountainkeeper and the 25 Catskill groups, organizations, 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 \$10 million in dedicated funds for the Catskill and Adirondack Parks**, along with making specific requests for continued support of the Catskill Park and its communities, **including \$12 million in dedicated funds for the Catskill and Adirondack Parks**.

In November of 2024, Catskill Center, ADK, Catskill Mountainkeeper, and **43 other Adirondack and Catskill groups and municipalities** signed on to a letter to Governor Hochul highlighting the need to increase the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) to \$500 million. The letter **celebrated last year's final budget and the \$10 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 \$12 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 was \$8 million in the final budget two years ago and **\$10 million in the final budget last year.**

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 second time, Governor Hochul has included \$8 million of the requested \$12 million** in dedicated stewardship funding in her Executive Budget Proposal.

**Please retain and increase this critical line to \$12 million in FY 25-26** with language that protects the dedicated stewardship funding for the Forest Preserve. The final budget the past three years has used the following: “for Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety and wilderness protection activities to address issues relating to overuse.”

<b>Stewardship Funding</b>	<b>24/25 Final Budget</b>	<b>25/26 Exec Proposal</b>	<b>Request</b>
Adirondack and Catskill Visitor Safety and Wilderness Protection	\$10 million	“\$8 million for Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety and wilderness protection activities to address issues relating to overuse”	“\$12 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 recreationists 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’s Visitor and Information Centers, Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center, and the SUNY ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center.**

Visitor Center	24/25 Final Budget	25/26 Exec Proposal	Request
Adirondack Mountain Club Visitor Centers	\$250,000	\$0	\$250,000
Catskill Center Congressman Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center	\$250,000	\$250,000	\$250,000
Paul Smiths Visitor Interpretive Center	\$250,000	\$250,000	\$250,000
SUNY ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center	\$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 reaches students in 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 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' Catskill Science Collaborative**, the **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 each of the preceding Science Facilities at \$200,000 each.

**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*

It goes without saying that all New Yorkers want clean water, clean air, flood mitigation, and access to nature that land conservation delivers. Governor Hochul and the NYS Legislature have shown their commitment to conservation with the Climate Leadership and Community Preservation Act, the Clean Water, Clean Air Green Jobs Bond Act, The Environmental Protection Fund, and NYS 30x30 legislation.

However, despite the leadership of the Governor and the Legislature, state agency structures and processes have failed to keep pace. For the past few years, the NYS land trust community has repeatedly asked the Governor and the Legislature to modernize the state land acquisition process. The system is broken. In 2007 NY State purchased over **283,000 acres** of land. In 2023, the last year reported, both DEC and OPRHP purchased a combined total of **3,800 acres**.

We were encouraged when the Governor's State of the State book included a section called **Make Open Space Accessible for All:** "*Recognizing the need for streamlined processes, the Governor will also champion several key initiatives. These will include modernizing the use of title*

*insurance to expedite land acquisitions, ... and reducing the financial hurdles faced by non-profit organizations in their land conservation efforts. These changes and investments will empower the state to more effectively protect our natural heritage for future generations.*

Regrettably the Governor's proposed Executive budget failed to include the main remedy to resolve these long standing issues.

A principal reason NYS is protecting fewer watersheds, conserving less open space, and creating fewer parks is because the Office of Attorney General insists on using antiquated processes to clear title. They want perfect title, not marketable title, in contrast to forty-nine other states and the federal government, not to mention the private sector.

You may have seen the news story two weeks ago about the Town of North Hudson in Essex County. The town has been working with the DEC to convey a conservation easement to DEC for over a decade over the popular Frontier Town campground. There is a title issue dating back to the 1850s. North Hudson estimates it will spend approximately \$50,000 looking for heirs to a property sold over 170 years ago to resolve a title issue that would be insurable in the private real estate market.

This is just one example; most land trusts or local governments trying to partner with NYS on land deals have their own tales of delays and costs associated with the Attorney General's unreasonable standards. Continuing a practice that is outdated and severely hampering the state's ability to protect land is bureaucracy at its worst.

DEC acknowledges there are over 100,000 acres awaiting to be purchased at a fair market value of \$180 Million. The average time it takes DEC to buy a property is nearly five years. There are more properties and more delays at OPRHP.

We are grateful to legislators who have focused attention on this matter and taken action. In 2024, title insurance legislation (S.6606A/A. 7372A) was passed by the full Senate and the Environmental Conservation Committee of the Assembly, but the bill never made it to the Assembly floor for a vote.

If Governor Hochul does not implement her State-of-the-State commitment in her 30-day amendments, we respectfully urge the Senate and Assembly to do so in their one-house budget bills.

### *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 about 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 in 2022** and 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.**

**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** 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.