



10 December 2021

Governor Kathy Hochul  
 Executive Chamber  
 Capitol Building  
 Albany, N.Y. 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,

The undersigned groups would like to bring to your attention the **incredible resource of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks** that serve all the citizens of New York State by protecting public wildlands and providing recreational access for health and well-being, supporting local and state tourism and economies, and preserving intact mature forests and habitat.

The Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks collectively **represent over 6.5 million acres of land** or nearly a quarter of New York State. The Adirondack and Catskill regions serve as home and recreation lands to **over a million residents** in Forest Preserve counties (including nearly 200,000 who live within park boundaries), and **over 25 million visitors annually**. In our current climate crisis, the Adirondack and Catskill 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 including the residents of New York City**.

We also would bring to your attention the **insufficient support for the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks** in the New York State Budget. **We recommend the following:** add \$10 million to the budget to address backlogged projects and increased use (including trail crews and recommendations made by the Adirondack High Peaks and Catskill

Strategic Planning Advisory Groups); increase DEC Lands and Forests staff; increase staff at the Adirondack Park Agency; support Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Justice (DEIJ) initiatives; properly budget the Forest Ranger division to reflect the recent increase in recruits; increase NY Works funding for DEC; increase funding for the important work of the EPF; and support Park Towns and Villages following Common Ground Alliance and Catskill Park Coalition recommendations.

### **Ten Million Dollars to Address High Use**

The popularity of New York's open space, parks, and wildlands has increased significantly over the past few years creating issues and opportunities for both the recreationists and the places they visit. The Forest Preserve Parks of the Adirondacks and Catskills are managed as wild forest lands and are more susceptible to impacts from increased use than are New York's other State Parks which are developed as built environments for the recreating public. In response to the high use of the Forest Preserve, the Governor appointed two advisory groups: the High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Group (HPAG) and the Catskill Park Strategic Planning Advisory Group (CAG). The HPAG has developed a report and recommendations and the CAG, which is still meeting, is in the process of doing the same. We respectfully request that **\$10 million dollars be provided in the SFY 22-23 budget for projects, including those identified in the HPAG and CAG, to support the increased use of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks** (see funding outline end of letter). The \$10 million should be used to fund trail maintenance and building work as well as to expand educational outreach on preparedness, safety, Leave No Trace education, inclusivity at frontcountry campgrounds and backcountry summits, and recreation infrastructure in Park Towns and Villages. This funding would also ensure that there are adequate temporary public bathroom facilities at trailheads and parking areas.

### **Increase Staff at the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)**

In order to continue to maintain the critical resources of the Forest Preserve Parks it is an absolute **necessity to increase staffing levels at DEC** which is currently operating at 1980 levels and is 250 positions below the staff cap imposed by the former administration. We are especially concerned about insufficient staffing levels in the Division of Lands and Forests. This division of DEC provides planners, foresters, and scientists to ensure that public land units containing thousands of miles of recreational trails, parking lots, campgrounds, picnic areas, boat launches, and protected forests and habitat are accessible and safe. The Division of Lands and Forests also provides supervision and coordination of the many Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) funded projects, as well as volunteer projects, for essential stewardship work such as maintaining trails, keeping infrastructure like lean-tos and fire towers in good operation, and educational outreach that protects delicate alpine summits, pristine aquatic habitat, and diverse visitor experiences. **We respectfully urge that staffing at the Department of Environmental Conservation be increased to 3,300 FTEs.**

### **DEC staff is needed to ensure open space is protected**

The lack of sufficient DEC staff has also contributed to an **eight-year backlog in acquisition projects** across the state. At a time when the future of the planet depends on protecting open space, this should be one of our highest priorities. Forest and wildland habitat mitigate the impact of climate change. Forest Preserve land provides this global benefit and preserves open space. As the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, residents across the state value their wildlands for healthful recreation, and they flocked to our parks and preserved wilderness areas in record numbers. This

demonstrates **strong public support -- and a strong public need -- for the expansion of our open spaces through land acquisition.** Certainly, such priorities extend beyond the funding requirements for any single year, but the need for wilderness preservation should always be a part of long-range planning.

*DEC staff is needed to address the high use of recreational areas on wildlands*

Increasing DEC staff by adding **positions to help implement projects and programs related to increased use** on the Forest Preserve is a recommendation supported by HPAG. Additionally, last year the Senate passed legislation to create a **Forest Preserve Coordinator position** for the Catskill Park to help address high use.

*DEC staff is needed to build and maintain trails, coordinate contracts and volunteers*

With the rapid increase in use of New York's public recreational facilities, often by new recreators discovering the health benefits of New York's open spaces and wildlands for the first time, the **need for high-quality, sustainable trails** that preserve access, safety, and a quality visitor experience for multiple generations is becoming clear. Most trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills were created 100 years ago, before modern trail layout and construction concepts were in place. Many of these trails need to be completely overhauled to improve public safety and protect the natural resource of the Forest Preserve. Today by employing sustainable trail design, DEC can create trails that protect the natural resource and withstand today's heavier use while providing a more enjoyable experience for hikers. Adding DEC staff would **enable the agency to create in-house trail crews** that would increase the efficiency of building and maintaining multi-generational trails and grow the recreational capacity of our public lands. **Additional funding for contracted professional crews should also be increased** to tackle the backlog of trail maintenance, building, and recreation infrastructure needs.

*DEC staff is needed to run state campgrounds on wildlands*

Another crucial area within DEC that must be supported to address high use on state wildlands are the **55 state public campgrounds in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve.** The Division of Operations operates DEC campgrounds and also maintains trailhead and day-use parking areas, signage and informational kiosks, restrooms, and other recreational facilities. Campgrounds and day-use areas serve as staging areas for visitors for their frontcountry and backcountry experiences where important educational outreach can occur. Campgrounds and day-use areas also provide recreational infrastructure with parking and bathrooms and should be supported and incorporated into planning to address the growing numbers of public land visitors.

*Support is needed for DEC Forest Rangers*

We would like to **thank you for hearing the call to support the New York State Forest Ranger force** with their own Ranger Academy and 40 slots for new recruits in 2022. The Forest Ranger force is a critical piece of Forest Preserve recreation infrastructure and ensures that visitors have safe experiences that also protect the natural habitats they explore. When people get lost or injured on the Forest Preserve, the Forest Rangers are there to get them safely back home. In the year ahead, it is **absolutely necessary that the current investment in 40 new Forest Ranger recruits is supported by the necessary equipment, vehicles, and the appropriate funding increases needed to support the 40 new positions.**

### DEC staff and program support is needed for DEIJ initiatives

Also essential is support for programs, opportunities, and recommendations that will build capacity in Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Justice (DEIJ) on our New York State public lands. Expanding DEC's successful **First-time Camper program** for group camping would provide a safer and more enjoyable experience for participants. Including other outdoor activities in this program such as bird-watching, fishing, or paddling would extend the experience and build more interest. We also **support the recommendations of the Open Spaces for All report** led by the Open Space Institute (OSI), and the work of the Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI). **DEIJ should be incorporated into all educational efforts and operational frameworks within agencies** operating in the Forest Preserve, and should be encouraged and supported **in non-profit and local governments** with whom the State of New York partners. Other programs that should be supported and expanded include the **Nature Bus and non-reimbursement grants to schools and nonprofits for transportation** to open space and public lands.

### DEC staff and funding is needed to combat invasive species

**DEC must have sufficient resources to address invasive species**, including staff for the Bureau of Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health to coordinate contracted projects, facilitate the eight statewide Partnerships for Regional Invasive Species Management (PRISMs), coordinate EPF funded projects, and conduct necessary field studies and analysis. Invasive species are a leading threat to biodiversity worldwide. The Adirondacks and Catskills are particularly susceptible to invasive species which infest aquatic and forest habitats, such as Zebra Mussels and Hemlock Woolly Adelgid.

### Increase staff at the Adirondack Park Agency (APA)

The APA also must be supported by **backfilling staff positions that have been vacated through retirement, and by increasing staff appropriately** so that the APA can fulfill its mission. The APA protects the resources of the Forest Preserve by ensuring that management plans comply with the Adirondack State Land Master Plan, and overseeing development proposals of the privately owned lands through the Adirondack Park Agency Act, the Freshwater Wetlands Act and the Wild Scenic and Recreational Rivers Act. **Thank you for the appointments made in 2020 to the APA board of directors.** However, there are currently board members serving with expired terms. **There should be an 11-member board serving in unexpired terms.** The board make-up should also reflect professional diversity including environmental attorneys, scientists, and people with regional planning experience.

### Increase NY Works Funding for DEC

NY Works capital project funding also plays a significant role in the work DEC can do in maintaining and enhancing the accessibility of the Forest Preserve of the Catskill and Adirondack Parks. DEC manages 5 million acres state-wide (including more than 900,000 acres of conservation easement lands) and over 2,300 miles of trails, 3,000 lakes and ponds, and 30,000 miles of rivers and streams in the Adirondacks alone. **NY Works funding for DEC capital projects must be increased** to match the responsibility that DEC has for the protection and maintenance of state lands and recreation infrastructure across New York. We respectfully urge you to invest **at least \$100 million in capital funds for DEC in the next budget proposal.**

### Support Catskill Park Coalition and the Common Ground Alliance Priorities

Another unique feature that distinguishes the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks from other state parks is that the Forest Preserve Parks have within their boundaries communities where people live, work, and raise their 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**, as integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks, **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 in the Catskills the Catskill Park Coalition (CPC) regularly meet to collaborate on whole park issues that include the needs of communities within the park as well as recreation and ecological concerns. Each year the CGA and CPC set priority agendas for the year ahead.

### Catskill Park Coalition (CPC)

The CPC, which represents organizations, chambers of commerce, and local and county agencies in the Catskills, has identified **three main areas of priority** for investment in the Catskill Park. Public safety and resources to manage the Catskill Park are critical, with investments needed to **1) increase the number of Forest Ranger staff patrolling the Park; 2) increase staffing levels within the NYSDEC's Division of Lands and Forests in Region 3 and 4; and 3) Grow and maintain Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) investments in the Catskill Park.** This includes funding for the Catskills Visitor Center, the Catskill Science Collaborative, Cornell University's "Save the Hemlocks" Initiative, community Smart Growth Grants, upgrades and improvements to the state-owned Belleayre Ski Center, funding to support Park education efforts, and infrastructure improvements and maintenance. Investing in local Catskill economies is critical to community sustainability and includes projects with direct community benefits that address increasing visitor pressures like **developing a swimming area at the Kenneth Wilson State Campground**, and implementing and constructing the previously approved **mountain biking trail system in the Shandaken Wild Forest.**

### Common Ground Alliance (CGA)

The CGA recently developed their priorities which include the creation of welcoming communities through housing diversity (i.e., quality housing for all income levels), the ability to attract and retain entrepreneurs (i.e., through training, mentoring, and incentives), and through support of DEIJ initiatives. Another CGA priority is Local Climate Change Adaptation which recognizes the need for funding for flood risk reduction, open space, water quality improvement, land use planning, disaster prevention planning, and self-sustaining stream restoration. Support for communities could be provided by state agency circuit riders. The CGA also identified the need to grow community-based recreation. In this, communities would identify needed recreation infrastructure and standardize education and information, organize events, and create innovative ways for communities to support recreation (e.g., gear "libraries" for lending equipment). The **Blueprint for the Blue Line** is the legislative agenda compiled to support CGA priorities.

### Clean Water Infrastructure

Infrastructure funding for **water quality improvement to address combined sewer overflows and wastewater treatment is a critical priority** for Adirondack municipalities. **Thank you** for your understanding of this and your commitment to \$600 million in grants for the

Water Infrastructure Improvement Act (WIIA) and the Water Quality Improvement Program (WQIP) that will go out to communities across the state for water infrastructure improvements. **Thank you** also for \$10 million in grants for asset management at water facilities, and \$20 million for the Green Infrastructure Grants Program. We respectfully urge you to provide at least **\$1 billion in new appropriations for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act (CWIA).**

### **Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act**

**Thank you** for your insight and leadership in expanding the proposed environmental bond act as the new \$4 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Environmental Bond Act. We are hopeful that additional funding in the bond act will be available for the Forest Preserve Parks for clean water infrastructure, open space, and recreation infrastructure.

### **Increase the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)**

The EPF has been holding steady at \$300 million for over 5 years. This year there must be a renewed plan to **increase the critical funding of the EPF to \$500 million.** Especially important is the funding for **state land acquisition, combating invasive species, water quality improvement, state land stewardship, and support for visitor centers** in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks. Under Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation in the EPF, **an increase in Smart Growth Grant funding could support municipalities** in creating facilities that would enhance municipalities **as Park Town Recreation Hubs** by providing parking, bathrooms, visitor information, trail access, and access to food and lodging.

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

Sincerely,

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Cc Basil Seggos, Commissioner NYS DEC  
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## Ten Million for High Recreational Use on the Forest Preserve

- **\$4 million for trail crews**
  - \$2 million for Contracted Professional Crews (in addition to \$2 million currently in the EPF)
  - \$2 million for DEC Trail Crews
- **\$2.5 million for trail safety and climate resiliency projects** (e.g., bridges over flashy streams, rerouting trails off of roads, etc)
- **\$500,000 (2 FTE) for coordinator and support positions in Catskills and Adirondacks** to implement recommendations from the HPAG, CAG, and Leave No Trace Assessment Reports and to coordinate social media working groups, stewardship committees, comprehensive planning, stewardship and educational programs, etc.
- **\$500,000 for more educational stewards in high-use areas of the Adirondacks and Catskills**
  - \$150,000 for educational outreach by Adirondack Mountain Club at the High Peaks Information Center Trailhead and Trails, and on Route 73 for the Adirondack High Peaks.
  - \$50,000 for educational outreach on Route 73 Corridor for east of Mt Van Hoevenberg Recreation Area
  - \$100,000 for educational outreach by Catskills Visitor Center/Catskill Center's Catskill Stewards at increased use locations in central, northern and eastern Catskills (Colgate, Kaaterskill, Blue Hole)
  - \$100,000 for education outreach by Catskill Mountainkeeper's Catskill Stewards at increased use locations in western and southwestern Catskills
  - \$100,000 NY-NJ Trail Conference Trail Steward Program, currently stationed on the Burrough's Loop Range, Blackhead Range, North Point, and Giant Ledge (Ulster and Greene Counties, N.Y.)
- **\$550,000 Support for Comprehensive Planning**, including visitor use management planning, traffic studies, etc.
- **\$600,000 DEIJ Programs Including**
  - Including projects such as the following,
    - Expand 1st time Camper Program to other activities such as paddling, birdwatching, winter recreation
    - Training for operations staff at campgrounds
    - Support recommendations from the Open Spaces for All report
    - Establish a DEIJ working group for the Catskill Park
    - DEIJ Facilitators attending all major Forest Preserve meetings (FPAC, CPAC, CAG, etc)
- **\$1 million Funding to support Adirondack and Catskill Park Towns and Villages for recreational infrastructure, including public bathrooms, public parking, information, and education.** Funding could also provide Catskill communities with Catskills Visitor Center kiosks, and the establishment of Trail Towns as described in Catskill Region Comprehensive Recreation Plan.
- **\$350,000 Trailhead Support** such as portable toilets, funding to update and refresh Catskill Park recreational wayfinding signage (currently no one is supporting/funding the ongoing maintenance of this), real-time data collection support such as trail and parking lot counters, and a pilot program to run fiber to a trailhead and provide real time data collection (along with potentially other public services).