



**Testimony of the Adirondack Council at the
Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the Environmental Conservation
Portion of the Executive Budget Proposal for Fiscal Year 2021-2022**

January 27, 2021

Good afternoon Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein and honored legislators. My name is Kevin Chlad, and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Adirondack Council.

The Adirondack Council is a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the ecological integrity and wild character of the Adirondack Park. We do not accept any government grants. We envision an Adirondack Park with clean water and air, healthy and abundant wildlife and large wilderness areas, surrounded by working farms and forests and vibrant communities.

We offer the following testimony in response to the Governor's Executive Budget proposal for the 2021-2022 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 the largest intact temperate deciduous forest in the entire 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, a refuge for wildlife, and a sponge for greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide.

The park is a patchwork quilt 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. This is the strongest conservation law in the world, and something New Yorkers take great pride in. The Adirondack Park Agency (APA), with a staff of 54 people and an 11 member board, provides oversight of the administration of the Forest Preserve, and is also responsible for long range planning for the Park. The Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is tasked with the care and custody of our Forest Preserve, and protecting the public 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 merge with the park's spectacular setting to create a place that is truly special.

Fostering a more Welcoming and Inclusive Adirondack Park

The Adirondack Park is a precious gift. We hope to pass it down to future generations in better shape than it is today. There is strength in diversity. Because of its diversity, New York reaps the benefits of the world's broadest pool of talent, skill and aspiration. The Adirondacks must welcome and nurture that diversity. In doing so we honor this national treasure and solidify it as a place of respite, refuge and peace, for everyone.

It's up to white Americans to eradicate racial injustice. Silence in the face of inequity is the same as consent. History has taught us all too well. Those who know the truth cannot remain silent and expect to remain untouched. In the absence of moral leadership, violence and hatred threaten to outpace compassion and understanding.

Whether facing a deadly pandemic such as COVID-19, climate change or officially sanctioned racial cruelty, the privileged have an obligation to take action and find new ways forward that honor all people and values richness of difference. Prosperity and peace will be elusive, and the Adirondacks cannot thrive for all, without justice and inclusion.

The future of the Adirondack Park depends on everyone feeling welcome and safe here. That takes work and commitment from local residents, businesses and organizations. Let's do something positive today to usher in a better tomorrow.

We intend to act. Try to change things for the better. Fess up to our mistakes, learn from them, and do better moving forward.

We will continue our work with the Adirondack Diversity Initiative to help the Adirondack Council evolve and improve as an organization that embraces all people, and welcomes them to a place of refuge and healing for all people. We will expand partnerships with other area organizations to amplify efforts towards creating a more welcoming and inclusive Adirondacks.

The Governor has proposed to fund the Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI) at \$250,000 for a third year. **To expand the work of the Adirondack Diversity Initiative in making the Adirondacks a more welcoming and inclusive community, we recommend a \$500,000 appropriation for the ADI this year.**

Addressing the Overuse of Wilderness Lands

The Adirondack Park now welcomes more than 12 million visitors annually, and with that success, modern challenges have emerged. During the Pandemic, record visitation numbers have continued, even with the closure of the Canadian border. Outdoor recreation has proven to be one of the few safe alternatives for people to socialize in a physically distanced setting. **As our state continues to battle Covid-19, we urge the Governor and legislature to recognize the important role the forest preserve**

has played in maintaining the mental and physical health, and overall wellbeing of New Yorkers in this challenging time.

Last year, forest rangers conducted 492 search and rescue operations (nearly a 50% increase over last year), most of which took place in the Adirondack and Catskills and were preventable. This was on top of their central role in the battle against Covid-19. The once pure waters flowing from the summit of Mount Marcy now test positive for E. Coli bacteria, signifying the presence of human waste, which is now found along our most popular trails all too often. Experts have identified more than 130 miles of trails in the High Peaks Region in need of major repairs or complete redesign. The limited state and partner trail crews have been able to rebuild just a few miles of trail per year with the resources they are provided. At this pace, there is a backlog spanning more than a century.

The *Parks 2020* Initiative and newly proposed investments under the Governor’s budget are supporting much needed improvements to our Parks system, but that money does not reach the Adirondacks or Catskills, our State’s two largest Parks. The gaps in funding for visitor management, education, trail repairs and staffing are showing, as demonstrated by the prior paragraph.

The Governor has acknowledged that there are limits to what our natural resources can withstand, and the DEC is concluding its work with the High Peaks Advisory Group to develop recommendations to better protect natural resources, visitor safety, and the Wilderness experience.

For the purposes of the FY2021-22 state budget, we call upon the Legislature to accept the proposed increase to the State Land Stewardship Category in the Environmental Protection Fund, and broaden the sub allocation for “Essex County Overuse” to a dedicated “Adirondack Catskill Forest Preserve Stewardship” sub allocation, in the amount of \$10 million. The recommendations of the High Peaks Advisory Group will require funding. A recurring investment is essential to much needed trail work, front country infrastructure, visitor education efforts, and a trial visitor reservation system for busy locations at peak times, as DEC currently does at select locations in both Parks.

Forest Preserve lands that are classified as “Wilderness” pursuant to the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan are largely managed using non-motorized/ non-mechanized techniques (i.e. manual labor with hand tools). While Wilderness stewardship can mean that more handwork and primitive techniques are employed, the intangible rewards are priceless. New York has the largest and most pristine Wilderness areas in the Northeast, and they exemplify the spirit of our Adirondack Park.

The Governor proposes to dedicate \$75 million in new NY Works monies for DEC in this year’s budget. The \$20 million increase is for the purposes of making repairs at the Conklingville Dam. If approved, those funds will, “improve access to State lands, rehabilitate campgrounds, and upgrade its recreational facilities,” all as part of the Adventure NY program. This funding will also provide for health and safety repairs to State infrastructure, including dams, wetland restoration, State lands, and fish hatcheries. We

support the continued funding of NY Works programs as a complementary effort to address the challenges of overcrowding and ensure people and communities see the benefits of New York's great outdoor national treasures.

Our Adirondack Forest Rangers have long served a traditional role in protecting our natural resources and ensuring the safety of the Park's visitors through education, regular backcountry patrolling/ enforcement of environmental laws, and undertaking the rescue of lost and injured recreationists. **With the dramatic increase in visitation over the last few years, our Rangers have become overwhelmed by the strong demand placed on their stagnant staffing numbers. Most search and rescue operations occur in the Adirondacks and Catskills, and fall upon a select group of highly trained individuals that answer their call to duty no matter the time of day or weather conditions. They are overworked, often conducting multiple operations in a single weekend. This is a symptom of a much larger problem that is addressed by implementing a Visitor Use Management Framework, as has been done at all of our major National Parks, but adding more traditional Forest Ranger staffing and other DEC staff including foresters and planners is an important part of the solution.**

Funding a 21st Century Adirondack Lakes Survey

Adirondack Lakes Survey Corporation (ALSC) was established in 1983 "to monitor changes to natural ecosystems of the Adirondack Mountains with a focus on water quality, atmospheric deposition, fish surveys, and other biological and chemical studies for the benefit of regulatory agencies and the general public." ALSC's primary goal is to undertake comprehensive surveys of Adirondack waters related to water quality and the effects of acid rain and climate change. **Data collected and analyzed by the ALSC has been, and continues to be, crucially important for the development of both State and Federal policies on emission control and air transport regulations. Additionally, this data set was helpful to our Attorney General in winning a recent court decision ordering the Environmental Protection Agency to protect New Yorkers from as many as 350 upwind coal-fired smokestacks.**

ALSC and higher education institutions around our state propose to undertake a new survey of Adirondack waters. **Working with institutions across the Adirondack Park, this new survey would be comprised of a three-year \$6 million project to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the current state of Adirondack lakes and streams with respect to their exposure to climate change, acidification, nutrient enrichment, invasive species, and salinization.** Just as with the original Adirondack Lakes Survey, the data collected will spur new research into Adirondack ecosystems and how best to manage and protect them for decades to come.

The Clean Water and Jobs Bond Act

We were saddened to learn that the "Restore Mother Nature" Bond Act would not be placed on the ballot in 2020. While we recognize the financial challenges New Yorkers have faced in the last 12 months, a \$3 billion bond act is exactly the cure our economy needs. If this pandemic has proven anything, it The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the direct linkage between public health and the economy. A Clean

Water and Jobs Bond Act would put New Yorkers back to work, implementing projects that will protect the health and quality of life of residents for generations to come.

A Bond Act will benefit the Adirondacks by funding projects that restore habitat and reduce flood risk including wetland, floodplain, and stream restoration and protection. The Bond Act can fund the acquisition of open space resources that provide wildlife habitat, protect water sources and right-size culverts along the Park's incredible rivers and brooks. The Bond Act can improve water quality and foster smart growth opportunities through wastewater infrastructure improvements for hardship communities in the Adirondacks, and further support efforts to restore degraded portions of the Forest Preserve that have suffered under heavy public use.

The Adirondack Council proudly supports a \$3 billion Clean Water and Jobs Bond Act and encourages the legislature to dedicate bond act funding to water infrastructure for low-income communities, climate resiliency efforts and associated recreational infrastructure in the Adirondacks and Catskills. This investment can aid in addressing a significant backlog of Unit Management Plan-mandated projects on Forest Preserve lands.

Preserving Clean Water

Recent years have brought great attention to New York State's challenges with failing and degrading water treatment infrastructure, and the Governor and Legislature have responded, to the delight of environmental groups, local governments and residents. The impacts of failing wastewater systems and failing septic systems has been far reaching – from closed beaches to impaired trout streams to threatened drinking water resources. The challenges local Adirondack governments face to take on these needs are enormous from a technical and operational basis as well a fiscal basis. Small Adirondack communities host disproportionately large numbers of visitors, requiring funding that their residents cannot afford.

Through five rounds of NYS's clean water program, more than \$58 million in grants have been coupled with approximately \$94 million in State Revolving Loan Fund low-interest financing to cover the balance of the project costs. Ultimately, the state's water grants have leveraged these low-interest loans, allowing communities to move forward with a total of \$152 million in clean water and drinking water infrastructure improvement projects in the Adirondack region since 2015. Even with these grants and this financing in place, the Adirondack Council's past reports on Clean Water Infrastructure projects in the Adirondack Park coupled with updated discussions with local communities estimate at least \$100 million in additional needs for wastewater treatment plants, septic systems and drinking water facilities.

The Adirondack Council supports Governor Cuomo's appropriation of another \$500 million this year (a third installment towards a \$2.5 billion commitment made two years ago). This funding should be used to close the gap for super-hardship communities in the Adirondacks and elsewhere, where small populations cannot afford the multi-million dollar loans necessary to make clean water a reality.

Environmental Protection Fund

We support at least a \$300 million appropriation for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) as we work towards a \$500 million EPF by the year 2025. The EPF is the cornerstone of capital funding for New York's environment, supporting efforts to protect open space, provide clean water, fight climate change and support vibrant communities and their working farms and forests.

As you consider the breakout of the EPF this year, we would like to draw your attention to a couple of other critical programs that were not already addressed in this testimony:

Open Space Protection

Open space is the central asset to the Adirondack economy, and open space connectivity makes the Adirondacks one of the premier refuge for wildlife in the Northeast. **Please continue funding open space protection at robust levels, to protect water quality at its source and to increase our state's resiliency in the face of climate change.**

Protected and well-managed private lands are widespread and a critical component of the Park's ecosystem. Land Trusts around the state are keeping large landscapes whole by purchasing conservation easements, making land holding more affordable for the owner, while opening up lands to public recreation uses. Because of this, we support the proposed \$2.5 million in funding for the Land Trust Alliance Conservation Partnership subcategory in the Open Space Account.

Invasive Species Prevention

The Adirondack Council supports the Executive Budget proposal of \$13.3 million. This increase in funding will support efforts to strengthen invasive species spread prevention efforts by nonprofit entities, lake associations and local governments in the Adirondack Park. EPF funding has supported an invasive species prevention strategy in the Adirondacks in recent years, and while that effort has had success in slowing the spread of aquatic invasive species (AIS), boats continue to drive by the washing stations. **Peak weekend boat counts demonstrated that more than 85% of trailered motorboats passed by designated invasive species inspection stations. To maximize benefits of the state's investment in aquatic invasive species prevention, boat inspections should be mandatory in the Adirondacks. This will not cost more money, and will ensure that we are reaping the full benefit of taxpayer investments.**

A study conducted by The Adirondack Nature Conservancy concerning the impacts of invasive species estimated that the potential direct economic impact from only eight invasive species that were evaluated could range from \$468 to \$893 million. Spending money now will save the state countless millions of dollars in the coming decades. Our abundant water resources paired with high visitor rates put the Adirondacks at the epicenter of the aquatic invasive species epidemic.

Visitor's Interpretive Centers (VICs)

We applaud the inclusion of \$180,000 for Paul Smith's College and \$120,000 for the SUNY School of Environmental Science and Forestry in the Governor's Executive Budget proposal, in support of their management of the Adirondack VICs. While previously owned and operated by the state, these educational institutions took over the management of these facilities at a time when the state's coffers could not support this vital resource to residents and visitors alike.

The VICs offer roughly 30 miles of trails, including more than 9 miles of interpretive nature trails, showcasing the natural beauty of the Adirondack Mountains and providing unparalleled opportunities to view, hear, photograph, and enjoy nature. Many of the trails are surfaced for easy walking, and have trail-side signs explaining natural and man-made features of the landscape. The trail systems traverse every habitat type found in the Adirondack Park (with the exception of alpine vegetation) and include extensive boardwalks through wetland ecosystems.

Adirondack Park Agency (APA)

With the recent resignation of APA board member Chad Dawson, a light was once again shown on the crisis state of this important Agency. Staff lack the numbers and resources to conduct careful alternative analyses, site visits, permit reviews, and long range planning efforts that they are required to conduct under the law. Without being able to replace critical positions, the APA will continue to face difficulties keeping up with permit timelines and will lack the resources to incentivize compliance with their regulations. **A compromised APA is not good for economic development in the Adirondacks.** The APA is one of our smallest state agencies, but carries a mission the Legislature established as vital for the entire state – *the protection and preservation of the natural resources and wildness of the Adirondack Park.*

Olympic Regional Development Authority

The Governor has proposed an additional \$119 million for upgrades to Adirondack facilities in preparation for the 2023 World University Games. The Adirondack Council supports this appropriation if the funding goes towards rehabilitation/ upgrade efforts that are found to comply with the "Forever Wild" provision of our State's Constitution. A Constitutional Amendment is still necessary for certain upgrades to comply with "Forever Wild" at the Mount Van Hoevenberg Ski Facility in Lake Placid.