

Testimony of the Adirondack Mountain Club at the
Joint Legislative Hearing on the Environmental Portion
of the 2013-2014 Executive Budget Proposal

February 4, 2013

Conservation



Education



Recreation

Since 1922

Good morning members of the Senate and Assembly. My name is Joelle Foskett and I am the Public Lands Advocate for the Adirondack Mountain Club. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Governor's Executive Budget proposal.

The Adirondack Mountain Club represents over 30,000 hikers and canoeists in New York. We sponsor programs that range from teaching people to hike safely to repairing our state's peerless hiking trail network. We are advocates for responsible recreation and protection of the Forest Preserve, State Parks and other wild lands. Our priorities today are state budget funding for open space protection and for stewardship of our Adirondack, Catskill Forest Preserve and our amazing state parks system.

ADK thanks the Legislature for their past support of the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and applaud the Assembly for passing the EPF enhancement bill last year which subsequently passed the Senate before being vetoed. We support this coming year's Executive Budget proposal that recommends the EPF be funded at \$153 million. This would be a much needed, and long overdue increase in funding. ADK commends the Executive Branch for its commitment to New York's environment and urges the Legislature to make a similar statement by passing a budget that begins restoring the EPF to previous levels.

Open space funding over the last several years has allowed New York to make important strides in land protection, and these needs continue. More work needs to be done in Long Island, the Catskills, the Hudson Highlands, the Shawangunk Ridge, western New York, the Adirondacks and beyond. We support open space preservation in our urban areas as well. We have many more accomplishments ahead of us in these areas.

ADK supports the Executive Budget proposal to increase open space and state park acquisition through the EPF. Despite the increase, this category is still recommend to be funded at a level that is a far cry from the 60 million it was once at, and we will need to continue increasing this fund just to meet the state's current obligations. In the upcoming years, New York faces tremendous dangers from natural gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale. The opportunities for New York to protect NYC's watershed will require immediate action if the Governor decides to move forward with this process. The Catskill-Delaware Watershed

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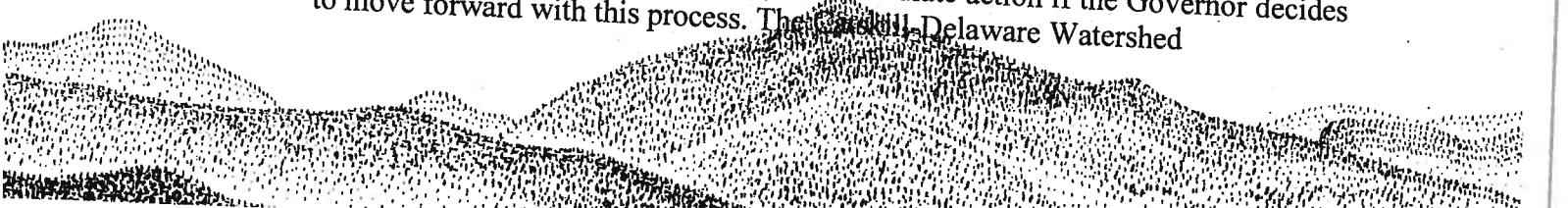
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is vital to the quality of drinking water provided to New York City and the surrounding metropolitan area. Without the ability to acquire more lands as development threats increase, the dangers of drinking water contamination have the potential to become health and financial crises because the time and money necessary for building a water treatment facility may just be too great for New York City to handle.

State Parks and State Forests are also in great danger of serious alteration of natural character if land acquisition funding is insufficient. Oil and gas drilling companies own roughly half of the subsurface mineral rights beneath Allegany State Park, the largest State Park in New York. Allegany State Park is revered as the State Park that provides Western New Yorkers with the closest wilderness experience outside of the Adirondack and Catskill Parks. Acquiring these subsurface mineral rights may be critical for the State to protect these valuable parks and forests. We must revamp the land acquisition category in order to protect these places from degradation.

Given that EPF land acquisition appropriations are allocated to both DEC and OPRHP it is critical that the EPF land acquisition appropriations remain sufficient in FY 2013-2014 so that the above-mentioned projects and many others can be completed before the opportunity to acquire these lands slips away.

ADK also supports the Governor's proposal in regards to the EPF's stewardship category. We believe that the state land stewardship account of the EPF is critical to protecting natural resources and accommodating public use and enjoyment of public lands. The stewardship account provides funding for traditional EPF stewardship projects for the Forest Preserve such as natural resource inventories, land planning, Americans with Disabilities Act compliance and backcountry trail work. This level of land stewardship funding will ensure that the Forest Preserve, its trails, and its swimming areas will continue to contribute materially to the economy of the Adirondacks and Catskills.

Hurricane Irene, and Sandy have put an increased strain on the large backlog of projects that are needed to keep these areas safe. As the Governor has said many times publicly; the impacts of global warming are going to continue to bring extreme weather events to New York. That being said, it is of the utmost importance that we fund stewardship at a level that will allow us to react in a timely fashion if and when these events occur.

This year ADK's professional trail crew was busy organizing volunteers to restore trails in the Adirondacks and Catskills that had been impacted by the previously mentioned storms. Additionally, to prevent future damage ADK organized a total of 303 volunteers, to invest 13,335 man hours, who patrolled 111 miles, cleared 380 blow downs, installed 2724 cubic feet of bridge abutments, and 990 feet of retaining walls, they also dug 880 feet of ditches just to name a few of their accomplishments. Recently we have seen hurricanes shut down entire regions of the state to the tourist economy they desperately need, more than ever money allocated to stewardship has proven to be a wise investment.

DEC's Division of Lands and Forests is still facing a large backlog of projects in need of funding. DEC's Division of Lands and Forests manages over 4,000 miles of recreational trails

on the Forest Preserve and State Forests for hiking, snowmobiling, cross country skiing and horseback riding providing access to fishing, boat launching, camp sites, beaches and scenic vistas. Stewardship funding is critical to ensuring that these lands are managed properly so that visitors can fully enjoy the many recreational opportunities that these lands provide.

Our Forest Rangers are also stretched dangerously thin; to give you an idea of how dire this situation is. In the 1960's there were over 140 Forest Rangers statewide. Today there are only 91. The Legislature made the Rangers the lead agency for wild land searches beginning in the 1970's, and there are about 260 of these each year. As far as people to keep an eye on, in 1983, 57,000 users entered the High Peaks Wilderness; in 1998 140,000. Compounding this issue further is the number of acres we expect rangers to cover; In Adirondack Forest Preserve; by the time the Finch purchase is complete, there will be 2.79 million acres. State-held conservation easements, which were 93,000 acres in 1992; today total 770,000! All with fewer Rangers than in the 1960's.

ADK commends Governor Cuomo for ending the trend of raiding unspent EPF money for General Fund relief, and starting the EPF on a path of recovery after drastic cuts have been made to this critically important fund. To date, About 25% of the fund or roughly \$500 million of total funding appropriated to the EPF over its history has been removed from the Fund. Cuts and sweeps in previous years has lead to an enormous backlog of projects.

This year's budget proposes to increase the EPF in two ways. First, the budget proposal includes \$15 million of revenue from the existing Bottle Bill, which generates as much as \$100 million annually.\$4 million of revenue is generated by new amendments proposed to the Bottle Bill which deal with various fraud enforcement and other technical issues. We would ask that regardless of the proposed new amendments passing that the legislature the \$19 million increase be maintained.

The environmental community has suffered a significant backlog for far too long. With evidence of climate change affecting our natural lands and resources, we must act now to ensure EPF will continue to be a viable, and reliable funding source into the future. An increase in the EPF is desperately needed to ensure this will be the case. We must not let New York's environment suffer any longer.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf on the Adirondack Mountain Club. Please let me know if you have any questions on our position on the state budget, I would be happy to try to answer them for you.