

**Testimony of The Land Trust Alliance Before the Joint Legislative Hearing on the
Environmental Conservation Portions of the Executive Proposed Budget for
New York State Fiscal Year 2022-23**

February 1, 2022

My name is Meme Hanley, and I am the New York Senior Program Manager for the Land Trust Alliance. On behalf of the state's more than 85 land trusts and their members and supporters, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the Governor's proposed environmental funding in the 2022-23 Executive Budget.

I am honored to share with you our commitment to advancing land conservation by empowering the work of land trusts across the state. We are proud of the Governor's and the Legislature's commitment to protecting open space for the many benefits it provides the public and today ask for your continued investment and partnership. Working together, alongside our many partners, we are improving the quality of life for our neighbors across the state.

Open spaces, of all kinds, have risen in prominence in the minds of many New Yorkers since the arrival of COVID-19. Land trusts are still leaning in, despite big challenges, to stay open for the public, accommodate greatly increased rates of visitation safely, and ramp up food production to feed hungry families from community gardens. We are working hard to stay focused on serving our communities. I can proudly say that land trusts accomplish this, and much more. Now, we must prepare for even greater challenges, including helping to mitigate the effects of a changing climate.

We applaud Governor Hochul's plan to invest \$400 million in the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). Today we are asking for your support of an EPF that includes at least \$40 million for the Open Space Account, \$3 million for the highly successful Conservation Partnership Program, \$1.5 million for the new Land Trust Conservation Easement Program and at least \$20 million for farmland protection. We also support reappropriations that are necessary for these programs, particularly as the pandemic, recent budget crisis and agency and department staff shortages have slowed spending.

The Land Trust Alliance works to save the places people need and love by strengthening land conservation across America. In New York, the Alliance serves as a leader, convener, partner, and technical assistance provider to a well-coordinated network of more than 85 nonprofit land trusts. These relationships provide the opportunity to see, firsthand, the benefits of the EPF and the role it plays in communities across the state. Public-private initiatives funded through the EPF such as the Conservation Partnership Program (CPP) – now in its 18th grant round -- and the Land Trust Conservation Easement Program advance the state's conservation and economic development objectives with projects that are locally developed and broadly supported. The Conservation Partnership Program is particularly notable for how quickly it moves appropriated funds to communities across the state.

Land trusts work in every region, including the Adirondacks, Western New York, the Finger Lakes, Tug Hill Plateau, Genesee Valley, Upper Delaware River Watershed, Hudson River Valley, Catskill Mountains, New York City and Long Island. Land trusts also save green space and promote community gardens in The Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan and in cities like Albany, Buffalo, Rochester, and Kingston. These permanently protected places provide fresh food, clean air and water, and wildlife habitat and help strengthen communities by providing opportunities for people to enjoy the nurturing health benefits of being outdoors.

Now, more than ever, land conservation is playing an important role in mitigating the worst effects of climate change, offering healthy outdoor opportunities for families during the COVID crisis, improving health, building community and boosting local economies.

Land Trusts are proven partners

- To date, local, regional and national land trusts operating across New York State have permanently conserved approximately two million acres through conservation easements, land acquisitions and re-conveyances to other conservation organizations or public agencies.
- New York's land trusts are engaging more members of their communities than ever before. New York's land trusts now count nearly 10,000 active volunteers and draw direct support from more than 73,000 members and donors, mostly from their own local communities.
- Land trusts are serving more people, in more places than ever before. The pandemic has created a surge of interest in the outdoors and a need for green spaces. Today we see land trusts working in rural, suburban and urban areas, identifying ways that land conservation can have tangible benefits by increasing food security, providing flood and storm mitigation, supplementing virtual and in-person classroom learning and supporting neighborhood stability.

Taking Action:

A cornerstone of the EPF is appropriations for the Open Space Account. It is imperative to right-size this funding to reflect the growing needs and priorities of our state. We see the Executive Budget increased allocation from \$30 million to \$40 million as a step in the right direction and down-payment on correcting years of disinvestment in this area of the EPF. We hope you will work to ensure this funding, in time, returns to its historic level of \$60 million.

Increase the Conservation Partnership Program to \$3 million from \$2.5 million

As local, nonprofit organizations, land trusts engage private landowners in efforts to conserve and enhance our most important natural resources – prime agricultural soils, local farms and community gardens; lakes, streams, wetlands, municipal watersheds and aquifers; forests and critical wildlife habitat; fragile coastal areas and estuaries. Land trusts have the local

knowledge, technical expertise and commitment to perpetuity that makes them excellent partners to the state and municipalities.

Continued investment in the Conservation Partnership Program will make certain that the rich legacy of conservation we enjoy today endures and that people in all regions can benefit from the EPF.

Because of its exemplary success over its near 20-year history, growing the CPP is a good investment.

- The CPP is a model of efficiency: Annually appropriated dollars are awarded to land trusts under a single contract with the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), delivering tangible impacts for communities and directly advancing New York's Open Space Plan.
- *Funds are typically awarded within eight months and the appropriation is spent down each year.* Administered by the Land Trust Alliance in partnership with the DEC, CPP funds are disbursed annually through a competitive grant process, creating immediate, lasting, and visible impacts on job creation, drinking water protection, recreational opportunities and community resilience to the impacts of climate change.
- The CPP has awarded 997 grants totaling \$21.7 million to land trusts across the state. Grant funds have helped leverage at least \$23 million in local matching funds and have supported the protection of more than 36,000 acres.

Investments in the CPP have built New York's land trust community to be one of the strongest in the nation. As a result of these investments, land trusts also serve as vital partners to the Department of Environmental Conservation, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the Department of Agriculture and Markets. Land Trusts spur economic growth, contribute to public health and help make communities more resilient to climate change.

We urge you to increase funding to the CPP to \$3 million in FY2022-23.

Land Trusts can Accelerate the Rate of Conservation for Agricultural and Forest Lands

One of most notable achievements of the EPF is the substantial investments that have been made in protecting farmland. By working with land trusts to conserve agricultural land across the state, the EPF has helped preserve an important part of our economy and a way of life for thousands of farm families. Land trusts are proud to have been a partner in helping the state protect more than 75,000 acres of farmland through the Farmland Protection Grants program. As farmers age and issues of farm succession become more pressing, ensuring that farms stay in production is vitally important. We urge you to ensure this work is well funded with at least \$20 million.

We also ask that you continue to support a bold new program for the protection of New York's forests, which provide critical benefits:

- Forests store carbon dioxide: Conserving them can draw down the carbon pollution that causes climate change.
- Forests filter water: They improve water quality for millions of New Yorkers.
- Forests provide jobs: Sustainable forestry and forest products generate important economic activity throughout the state each year.
- Forests provide important habitat for wildlife and recreation for people.

While we have significant, publicly owned forests in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks and state forest areas, 75% of New York's forests are privately owned. These assets have been stewarded by forest owners, who now confront many of the same issues that are facing family farmers. The median age of a forest owner is 60, and most do not have a viable plan for the long-term future of their forest lands. In preparing for the Land Trust Conservation Easement Program, land trusts identified \$70+ million in potentially eligible projects from all over New York. These lands are at risk of conversion at a time when New Yorkers need forests more than ever as a front line of defense in a changing climate.

The average income of most family forest owners in New York State is less than \$100,000, putting their forests at serious risk for conversion due to the high costs of carrying property, such as property taxes. The average parcel size for a family forest is generally too small to fall under the criteria for state protection. In addition, for many forest landowners, their assets are in the land; which puts donation of their land for conservation out of reach. Many forest owners are left with limited options to conserve their property. The new Land Trust Conservation Easement Program is a meaningful step in addressing this problem. The pandemic has caused land prices to grow at breathtaking pace, further pressuring forest owners to sell. Increasing the ability of land trusts to work with landowners who want to protect forests now will reduce the risk of losing these lands forever.

We urge you to support the Governor's proposal to fund, as part of the Open Space Account, the Land Trust Conservation Easement Program at \$1.5 million.

Invest in One of New York's Greatest Assets: Hardworking State Employees

Outside of the EPF, we strongly encourage you to reinvest in our state environmental agencies by increasing staffing levels towards their 2008 levels. To her credit, Governor Hochul has heard our joint request for more state agency staffing and has lifted the hiring freeze. These corrections will enable state funds to be spent more quickly, increase the public's safe access to open space and help land trusts complete transactions more quickly - allowing them to remain the nimble, community-focused organizations New York relies on.

Support the Clean Water, Clean Air Green Jobs Bond Act

An Environmental Bond Act is overdue for New York State, and we endorse Governor Hochul's

plan to increase the Bond Act to \$4 billion. We look forward to playing a strong role in the development, passage, and successful implementation of the Environmental Bond Act, which we believe will help rebuild New York's economy, increase our resilience to climate change and ensure a healthier, greener future for all.

In Closing

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on the proposed FY2022-23 Executive Budget. Providing the people of New York with an EPF that meets today's needs and solves tomorrow's problems is key to our state's long-term health and well-being. This can only be done by fully funding the EPF, investing in land trusts and conservation easements, and supporting the programs and people that complement these efforts.