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**2022 Joint Legislative Hearing
On Environmental Conservation
February 1, 2022**

Presented by: Art Perryman, Forest Ranger Director
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Warren County
PBA of NYS Board Member

Introduction

Good afternoon members of the legislature. My name is Art Perryman. I have been a New York State Forest Ranger for 20 years and am currently stationed in Region 5, Warren County. I am also a board member of the Police Benevolent Association of New York State (“PBA of NYS”). I am here today to testify about the status of the Forest Ranger Division within DEC.

Before I begin my prepared statement I would like to take a moment to thank all of the state legislators who have championed the interests of the State’s Forest Rangers as well as those of my fellow PBANYS members which include State Park Police, State University Police and State Environmental Conservations Officers. We feel we are making great strides in advancing the needs of our members and thank both the state legislature and Governor Hochul for their cooperative and civil approach to governing. It is a welcome change in Albany and it is long overdue.

This year the Forest Ranger Division continued to use our expertise in The Incident Command System to manage Covid 19 testing and vaccination sites around

the state. We continued to protect State Lands and the people who use those lands through law enforcement and education. We responded to and fought wildland fires from the deciduous forests of Northern New York State to the Giant Sequoias of California. Our members deployed to the hardest hit county in Kentucky at Governor Hochul's direction to care for our fellow Americans as they cared for us in our time of need twenty years ago. We also responded to hundreds of search and rescue missions in the State of New York.

Search and Rescue Missions

I was here before this committee in 2018 and testified to the record numbers of search and rescue missions we were experiencing. At that time the number averaged around 350 annually. In 2020 we saw a new record of 492 and last year a total of 431 missions. We can only expect this trend will continue as more and more people visit the Forest Preserve as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Forest Rangers are part of the communities where we live and part of the larger community of people who share the same love of the outdoors. We are proud of the many diverse ways we serve this community, but our hundreds of life saving search and rescue missions rank paramount.

This past year was no exception. We had many occasions where Forest Rangers were responding to multiple rescues, searches and recoveries all at once. Forest Rangers are never required or compensated to be on-call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, but we always rally together to handle these incidents, coming in from days off and leaving family functions to be there. These incidents come at random, and Rangers have always risen to the occasion.

One such Tuesday this year, Forest Rangers were responding to a death five miles inland in the High Peaks Wilderness area at the same time other Forest Rangers were searching for missing hikers and making another recovery in the Southern Adirondacks. Rangers who had been out all night followed all this up by carrying an injured hiker off of Allen Mt. On another day Forest Rangers were just finishing a helicopter evacuation from Crane Mountain when they were told to head toward

another on Pillsbury Mountain. In the High Peaks Wilderness, it is not uncommon to have 2 or three carry outs in the same afternoon. These days have become common for the Forest Ranger Force.

Rangers often need to be lowered from helicopters, use chainsaws, stay interior for days at a time, set up communication relays, manage multiple resources, use advanced land navigation and search in extreme terrain. If you or a loved one found yourself lost or seriously injured, there is no substitute for a well-trained, equipped and experienced Forest Ranger.

The purchase of more state land and successful tourism campaigns have been a great benefit to the state and its people. However, the success of these two initiatives, have unintended consequences of an ever-increasing number of incidents and resulting search and rescue missions. We will always endeavor to answer every call, to save a life no matter the risk, but we need the resources to address this increased demand in the safest manner.

Continued Support for Forest Ranger Staffing

In 2021, to recognize and meet these challenges, DEC Commissioner Seggos announced that the DEC would be hiring 40 new Forest Rangers. They are set to begin their 7 months of training in May. I want to thank the Environmental Conservation Committee members and the Legislature for your support. I know it was instrumental in bringing about this historic investment in the Forest Ranger Force.

Forty additional Rangers is an outstanding first step, but the State and DEC still have a long way to go to secure and support the Forest Ranger mission into the future. We currently have only 90 rangers in the field and will have 22 eligible for retirement by the time this academy graduates. In addition, the current civil service list has been completely exhausted and only 46 applicants have made it through the process to be eligible to enter the academy. It is likely that the actual number to graduate will be somewhat less than 40 and attrition could soon erase any staffing gains to be made.

20 Year Retirement (S.4523 / A.6457 2021)

The DEC needs to be looking ahead to ensure there is a plentiful and diverse pool of applicants to take the Forest Ranger Exam. To that end I believe it is essential to offer a competitive retirement plan that is comparable to other police and professional firefighters in the State of New York and across the nation. All of the Police titles that work for New York State need to have a 20-year retirement. I know this committee recognizes this fact, and I to thank you and the entire legislature for unanimously passing our retirement bill to put the police titles within the PBANYS on the same footing with their peers. See, S.4523 Same As A.6457 (2021)(veto message 77).

I would like to ask for your continued support in seeing this measure be added to the 2022-2023 fiscal year budget. Governor Hochul indicated in her veto message that the proper venue for securing the much needed 20-year retirement is through the state budget process. We accept that practice and we ask you to work with the Hochul Administration to see that this benefit is provided to our members so we can recruit and retain the best and brightest. The people of New York State deserve Forest Rangers chosen from the very best we have to offer. In order to do that this state must at least offer the industry standard in police and fire retirement.

Upgrade to the Forest Ranger Title Series

Additionally, The Forest Ranger title series needs to have an upgrade approved by Civil Service. Currently the pay grade for Forest Rangers does not adequately reflect the diverse, difficult and dangerous duties that Forest Rangers perform. Because of this, the title series lacks incentive for promotion and the situation has been damaging to recruiting leadership within the Division.

Due to pay compression it is common for subordinates in the series to make more than their supervisors. To maintain the level of professional development that the complex and difficult Forest Ranger Mission demands it is essential to fix this problem. I believe that a recent upgrade package denial by Civil Service was an

unfortunate decision, and it is our intent to resubmit under Governor Hochul's administration.

Equipment

The Forest Ranger Division needs to secure more funding for equipment. I want to thank Commissioner Seggos for making the funding of the Forest Ranger Division a higher priority. However, with the addition of 40 new rangers the division still finds itself playing catchup with regard to essential equipment. Even though the Department has pledged a good faith effort to adequately outfit Forest Rangers many are still buying their own gear to perform winter and swiftwater rescues. The snowmobile and boat fleet used on rescues also is in need updating.

All of this will require a more robust budget. I also believe that the Division needs to develop and implement an orderly replacement schedule in each year's budget rather than the current reactive replacement approach that only seeks to meet needs when equipment degrades beyond its useful life. To accomplish this the Environmental Protection Fund Stewardship Allotment and general fund money that comes to the Division could be and should be increased.

Out of State Deployment

New York State Forest Rangers have become nationally respected for fighting wildfires across the west, Alaska and Canada as well as responding to other large disasters such as the aforementioned Kentucky tornadoes. In 2021, two Forest Ranger crews and a number of higher-level incident managers were sent out of state to fight wildfires from California to Minnesota.

Out of State deployments give NYS Forest Rangers the expertise to combat large wildfires in NYS and manage large incidents using the Incident Command System. Forest Ranger salaries and all associated costs are entirely reimbursed when working out of State. The program is essential to continue this work in State and ultimately brings additional federal dollars and expertise back to our program. This

program should be supported and expanded and we thank Governor Hochul for recognizing the unique and specialized skills our Rangers have that can help save the lives of our countrymen in need.

Conclusion

We have met with many of you to explain these critical issues. We know you all believe that the people of New York State deserve the very best. They deserve a Ranger force of sufficient size and that spends its days in the wildlands, ceaselessly training in every discipline of search and rescue and large incident management for that eventual and fateful day when we will be called into service to save lives and property. This is more than a career for us, it is a calling to help people in their hour of need. Today we are asking for your help.

We implore you to please include and advocate for the 20-year retirement for the members of the PBANYS as part of the state budget that you will negotiate with Governor Hochul. Your help is appreciated now more than ever.

THANK YOU