

Adirondack Council  
Adirondack Mountain Club  
Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve  
Catskill Center for Conservation and Development  
Catskill Mountainkeeper  
Protect the Adirondacks !

December 3, 2019

Basil Seggos, Commissioner  
NYS Department of Environmental Conservation  
625 Broadway  
Albany, NY 12233

Dear Commissioner Seggos,

We write out of concern for the **NYS DEC Forest Rangers and the DEC Division of Forest Protection** comprised of Forest Rangers within the Office of Public Protection, or OPP. Over the years, a diverse coalition of stakeholders within the Adirondacks, Catskills and beyond have written to your predecessors, the latest instance being in 2011, with concerns that the Forest Rangers and the Environmental Conservation Officers might be merged within OPP. Each time the issue has arisen, a diverse coalition has made the case why such a move would trigger a firestorm of protest and prove a disaster for the State's public lands and the outdoor recreating public. We continue to feel this way - and felt it was timely to write to you, as we have to prior commissioners.

As you know, the Forest Rangers within the NYS DEC have a long history of providing land stewardship and public education on the State's public lands dating back to 1885. They have distinct duties and provide unique public service to resource and public protection and communication on public lands. The Forest Rangers are well prepared, trained and equipped to carry out forest fire control, search and rescue, emergency incident response, and communication with the public about safe use of the resource within the three million acres of Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve, the one million acres of protected Conservation Easement and within the State Reforestation Areas. Implementation and enforcement of the NYS Environmental Conservation Law and Unit Management Plans on public lands are also important aspects of their work.

The 106 field Rangers and their supervisors today are distinct from all other New York State employees, including the NYS DEC Environmental Conservation Officers. They need to continue to be distinct within the OPP. Their tasks as front line guardians of the State Lands extend well beyond

law enforcement, emergencies, and search and rescue because DEC land management obligations have grown so complex due to the diversity of users and issues. The criticality of the Forest Rangers in addressing the congestion along the Adirondacks' Route 73 trailheads is just a recent example of this complexity. The Forest Rangers play an essential role as educators about state land to a public that is highly technologically oriented and often lacking in awareness of their safety, hygiene and broader impacts on trailheads, trails, lakes, streams, rivers and summits. ECOs, while equally critical within the broad DEC mission, lack this legacy, the relevant training and skills.

To be even more specific, in communities that we frequent across the Adirondacks and Catskills and elsewhere, Forest Rangers are known for their local knowledge, competence and ability to rapidly assemble teams to perform search and rescue, fire control and emergency incident response. The hiking, camping, and paddling public has come to rely on Forest Rangers as being approachable, communicative, informative, educational and prepared in an emergency. You know better than any of us that the Forest Rangers are also viewed as national leaders in firefighting and emergency incident response and their advice and assistance is frequently requested by other states.

Given their proud history, unique responsibilities on public lands, self-reliance, teamwork and specialized training and equipment, merging the Forest Rangers with the Environmental Conservation Officers would effectively lose the morale and the full cooperation of the Ranger force. That, in turn, would become a public health and public relations disaster for any Governor. For example, the 275,000-acre High Peaks Wilderness, our largest wilderness, would become a more degraded, more lawless and a much more dangerous environment in which to invite the public to recreate. Your pending Strategic Initiative for the High Peaks could not be professionally implemented without motivated, dedicated Forest Rangers. In addition, the many Assistant Forest Rangers who are the DEC's eyes and ears throughout the many Wilderness and Wild Forest areas of both the Catskill and Adirondack Parks from May through October would lose their training, supervision and effectiveness in the backcountry. This would also immediately jeopardize public health and safety.

We deeply respect the critical, complementary role that ECOs perform for New York's environmental quality and integrity. However, we point out that their ECO training, recruitment, supervision and knowledge are not at all suited to the challenges you and the Governor face every month on our public lands and waters.

Our generation is blessed, as others have been, to have the DEC Forest Rangers as front-line problem-solvers, emergency responders and communicators serving those who visit our highly diverse state lands and waters, and serving the interests of your Department and Governor Cuomo to have a magnificent public land base in which to visit and recreate. We are, therefore, united in our support for the Division of Forest Rangers and in firm opposition to any plans, whether now or in the future, to merge divisions within OPP.

We are also highly appreciative of your very visible and vocal support for the DEC Forest Rangers throughout your tenure as commissioner, and we look forward to that continuing.

Yours respectfully,

Willie Janeway, Executive Director  
Adirondack Council

Michael Barrett, Executive Director  
Adirondack Mountain Club

David Gibson, Managing Partner  
Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve

Helen Chase, Board Member  
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Protect the Adirondacks !

Cc: Judy Drabicki, Deputy Commissioner  
Chris Ballantyne, Regional Affairs  
Rob Davies, Director, Lands and Forests  
Eric Lahr, Director, Forest Protection