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Adirondack Lakes Alliance
Protecting & Preserving Adirondack Waters Since 2014



November 21, 2024

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

RE: Adirondack Park FY26 Funding Priorities

Dear Governor Hochul,

In recent years your administration has taken actions to help fund and find solutions to road salt pollution in the Adirondack Park, invest in innovative new Forest Preserve management programs using Visitor Use Management, helped to make the Adirondack Park more welcoming and accessible to all New Yorkers, and supported core Adirondack and North Country programs and institutions. As we look ahead to the new state budget and Legislative Session in 2025, we urge you to help us confront the

urgent challenges facing the Adirondack Park. These challenges include open space protection, the impacts of global climate change, road salt pollution, invasive species impacts, clean water protections, and the shortage of affordable housing in our communities. The people and natural resources of the Adirondack Park need your administration to bring to bear the full resources of the State of New York to help tackle these difficult problems.

Your new Executive Budget will set out your priorities for the Adirondack Park and will shape how the North Country will fare in the coming year. We know that a healthy environment and vigorous economy work together to serve the Adirondacks. Bold, strategic investments in the preservation of the Adirondack Park are essential to the regional economy and vitality of its small rural communities. As you develop your Executive Budget proposal for the 2025-26 fiscal year, please consider the following list of critical investments as core parts of your Adirondack Park agenda.

\$500 Million for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF): The EPF is critical for local economies and environmental protection initiatives in New York. The EPF has been funded at \$400 million for the last several years, and it needs to be increased. We urge you to increase the EPF to \$500 million annually, to meet the demands across the State for these funds that assist numerous local governments and organizations.

\$50 Million for Open Space Protection: \$50 million for open space protection and land conservation is needed to protect open space that safeguards our communities from increasingly frequent and severe storms. Increased funding for open space protection is especially needed to protect the preeminent 36,000-acre Whitney Park, located in Hamilton County in the Adirondacks, that has been a priority in the State Open Space Conservation Plan for decades and is now available for purchase. The open space funding should include \$5 million for the Land Trust Alliance Conservation Partnership Program and at least \$5 million for their Conservation Easement Programs.

\$50 Million for State Land Stewardship: With more land coming under State ownership, \$50 million for State Lands Stewardship split between the DEC and OPRHP is necessary. This funding should include the following:

- At least \$12 million for Adirondack Visitor Safety and Wilderness Protection.
- \$4 million for Parks and Trails Grants Program.
- \$1 million for Wildlife Research on State Lands.
- There should also be \$1 million included for a long-required and long-overdue Carrying Capacity Study on the Saranac Chain of Lakes. Funding is necessary to facilitate timely implementation of the Carrying Capacity Study, which is required by the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, because of the increasing pressure on the Saranac Chain of Lakes and the escalating need to protect these natural resources from degradation resulting from overuse.
- \$2.5 million should also be included for the Survey of Climate and Adirondack Lakes Ecosystems (SCALE), a multi-year study of how climate change impacts waterbodies in the

Adirondacks. SCALE researchers from Cornell College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs), Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), the Ausable Freshwater Center and other academic partners will examine how climate change impacts baseline conditions of waterbodies, explore the relationships between climate change and harmful algae blooms, food webs, and mercury bioaccumulation. This data will inform future climate policymaking and guide strategic investment in greenhouse gas reduction and climate resiliency.

- We also support funding for Adirondack Architectural Heritage’s management of educational and interpretative programs at historic Camp Santanoni.

\$1 Million for Adirondack and Catskill Visitor Interpretive and Information Centers: We support funding Visitor Centers at \$1 million, with \$250,000 each for Paul Smith’s Visitor Interpretative Center (VIC); the SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) Adirondack Interpretative Center (AIC); and the ADK High Peaks Information Center and Cascade Welcome Center. These facilities are strategically located and attract visitors traveling to popular areas. Continued funding of these centers, which rely heavily on private fundraising, is critical as they serve to protect the Forest Preserve, keep recreators safe, educate youth and the public, and highlight community assets.

\$20 Million for Invasive Species Control and Management: We support expansion of the Invasive Species Account to \$20 million this year, split evenly between prevention and interdiction and eradication. These funds assist local governments and many entities across New York in their work to educate the public about invasive species and stop their spread. The Adirondack Park is the only place in New York with a large number of waterbodies that remain free of invasive species infestations and we need to keep these waters free and pure. Cornell’s New York State Hemlock Initiative works in the Forest Preserve and across the state to protect Hemlock Forests from Hemlock Woolly Adelgid.

\$400,000 for Science and the Environment: \$400,000 is needed to support the research and monitoring taking place in the Adirondack Park by the Adirondack Watershed Institute at Paul Smith’s College and the Atmospheric Science and Research Center (ASRC) Whiteface Mountain Field Station. These institutions are leading environmental research in air, water, and forests in the Adirondacks and New York State. They should be allocated \$200,000 each.

\$4 Million for Smart Growth Grants: We support continued funding of \$4 million for the Smart Growth program for communities in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks.

Preserving Clean Water and Promoting Community Vibrancy

While significant progress has been made in recent years, a number of more challenging projects have yet to be funded. The impacts are far-reaching – from closed beaches to impaired trout streams to harmful algae blooms. Small Adirondack communities host large seasonal influxes of visitors, including

vacation rentals that stress these aging systems further, especially impacting the shores of our Adirondack lakes.

Investments in water infrastructure constitute one of the most pivotal investments the state can make in protecting Adirondack waters while promoting new business and affordable housing in Adirondack Park hamlets. New York State has granted close to \$150 million in grants in Adirondack communities since 2016, leveraging close to \$300 million in clean water infrastructure projects, but there still remains a backlog in the Environmental Facilities Corps Intended Use Plan of \$200 million in future Adirondack community wastewater and sewer capital projects alone that still that need to be done.

The Clean Water Infrastructure Act should be allocated at least \$600 million in your Executive Budget.

Road Salt Pollution Reduction: We support expanding funding as part of the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act for road salt management and control efforts in Adirondack Park communities to fund new technology and equipment for highway maintenance and pilot testing with alternate winter road maintenance programs. These efforts help to implement some of the recommendations of the Adirondack Road Salt Reduction Task Force report, which documented solutions and strategies needed to reduce road salt pollution. Investments in road salt reduction have proven effective at dramatically reducing pressures on local winter road maintenance budgets. Eligibility for grant funds from the NYSDEC Road Salt Storage Facility program in the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act should be expanded to include equipment for salt reduction best management practices.

Closed State Facilities on the Forest Preserve: We urge you to work with the State Legislature to formulate a constitutional amendment that allows the closed correctional facilities on the Forest Preserve to be redeveloped or repurposed so that they can provide a public benefit for the communities where these facilities are located.

Fostering Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Climate Justice for the Adirondacks

We all must do more to ensure that all New Yorkers have the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from the precious resources of the Adirondack Park. The Adirondacks can be a place of respite, a critical asset in fighting climate change, and a place of opportunity for those pursuing green jobs. We support funding for Adventure NY projects that improve access to New York's wide array of State lands, and urge DEC to develop a comprehensive accessibility policy to guide and promote accessibility and inclusivity in a way that is consistent with the State Land Classifications that apply to the Forest Preserve.

Timbuctoo Summer Climate and Careers Institute: The fight for climate, environmental, and social justice demands that as we fight climate change, we better connect the Adirondack Park with communities living on the frontlines of climate change impacts across the state. We celebrate that New York's Adirondack Park was a cradle of the early fight for Black suffrage. In that same spirit of

opportunity, the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Institute introduces high school students to a broad spectrum of green job opportunities, fostering the next generation of environmental stewards and climate advocates. The first two years of this program were a great success, with the SUNY school of Environmental Science and Forestry and CUNY Medgar Evers hosting 41 students from the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn. In the summer of 2024, at least 46 students from all five New York City Boroughs attended the program. The program sees an opportunity to grow stronger in the coming years, while working within its existing budget framework. We encourage you to restore the Timbuctoo Summer Climate and Careers Institute to \$2.1 million once again this year.

The Adirondack Diversity Initiative: The Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI) works to make the Adirondack region more welcoming and inclusive to all New Yorkers. ADI, through its host organization the Adirondack North Country Association (ANCA), currently benefits from a \$420,000 appropriation in the DEC Aid to Localities Budget. Along with many other ongoing efforts, ADI provides critical anti-bias training to Environmental Conservation Officers, Corrections Officers, and other law enforcement officers, and that work continues to expand and grow stronger. A new Micro-Credential focused on welcoming and belonging launched in 2024, building on critical work to grow welcoming and belonging, as well as BIPOC stewardship and entrepreneurship across the region, and an ADI symposium will be hosted every other year. We support the continued allocation to ANCA and ADI as it works to grow its program's impacts and effectiveness.

African American Experience in the Adirondacks: The Adirondack Experience (ADKX) plans to create a major permanent exhibition dedicated to the untold story of African Americans and their experiences, past and present, in the Adirondacks. The 2,500-square-foot African American Experience in the Adirondacks exhibition will include hands-on, interactive features to engage 21st-century audiences. The exhibition will provide a focus for encouraging Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities to visit the region. We urge your support with \$1 million towards this \$2 million project as it works towards a 2027 launch.

Increase Forest Rangers Staffing

DEC Forest Rangers continue to do an outstanding job day in and day out, and they need to be fully staffed and supported in order to allow them to serve the safety needs of the public and the public lands that they safeguard. Stretching their numbers to the breaking point is not good public policy nor is it good for the ranks of men and women putting their lives at risk to save others. Your budget should reflect the importance of these public servants by increasing the size of their ranks, and giving them parity with other law enforcement officers in their retirement benefits. Specifically, the budget should include funding to double and diversify the current Forest Ranger force.

Furthermore, as the State acquires more land, and we ask State employees to do more to protect the environment for current and future generations in light of climate change and ever-present and increasing

threats from development, and from emerging chemicals threatening pollution, the State agencies responsible – DEC and the Adirondack Park Agency - need increases in the numbers of their staff. Department-wide there should be DEC staff increases of 225 FTEs. The State’s land acquisition process must be streamlined by adding staff to DEC’s Bureau of Real Property and implementing the use of title insurance to protect the State’s land interests.

The Adirondack Park Agency needs its Board Members and staff to refocus on its core mission and purpose, and the Adirondack Park Agency Act needs to be updated so that the agency can return to being a preeminent leader in environmental protection. The Executive Budget needs to reflect that these two agencies (DEC and APA) and their work is critical to the success of the people and the protection of the natural resources of the Adirondack Park.

Open Space Protection to Meet the 30 by 30 Goals

We all applauded when you signed the 30 by 30 Act in 2022, which committed the State of New York to protecting 30% of the state’s lands and inland waters by 2030. This is an audacious and ambitious goal that mirrors efforts in a dozen other states and the national goal set out by President Biden. We all stand ready to help in any way.

The State of New York has a long and proud history of land protection for more than 150 years. Through world wars, economic recessions and depressions, and massive changes to New York and American societies, land protection has continued decade after decade. Now we confront the need to heighten our land protection work to meet the challenges of climate change, protect community resilience, and preserve the intact natural world for future generations.

To meet the 30 by 30 goal, the State of New York needs to commit greater resources for land protection funding and to staffing Real Property and land acquisition staff at the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP).

Climate Protection Based Private Land Forest Management Program

We strongly urge you to create a new land protection program coupled with a tax incentive that will encourage proforestation across New York State. Protecting standing forests and keeping them growing intact while reducing carbon in the atmosphere will be good for community safety, climate resiliency, and New Yorker’s wallets. A climate protection-based program for private forest lands will be particularly beneficial for landowners in the Adirondack Park where there are millions of acres of privately owned forests that are at risk of conversion to non-forestry uses. Such a program, designed for willing private landowners across New York, would provide them with a one-time payment and annual tax benefits in exchange for permanently “leaving mature forests intact” for the purpose of “carbon

sequestration, storage, and climate resilience”. NY Climate Action Council Scoping Plan, Chapter 15, at 277.

Conclusion

The organizations listed here urge you to embrace the agenda that we have outlined above because it will help to meet the critical needs facing the environment and small rural communities of the Adirondack Park. This is an ambitious agenda that supports action in the next fiscal year, and creates a foundation to continue to build on in future years. Your executive budget proposal will communicate your priorities and values as our Governor. We urge you to lift of the Adirondack Park as the iconic wilderness landscape that it is, and grant our Park the resources it deserves. We stand ready to help in any way possible to help you advance these policies and programs. Thank you very much for your stalwart support for the Adirondack Park.

Sincerely,

Raul J. Aguirre, Executive Director, Adirondack Council
David Gibson, Managing Partner, Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve
Julia Goren, interim Executive Director, Adirondack Mountain Club
Claudia Braymer, Deputy Director, Protect the Adirondacks! Inc.
Scott Ireland, Executive Director, Adirondack Lakes Alliance
Scott Ireland, President, Schroon Lake Association
Roger Downs, Director of Conservation, Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter
Pete Nelson, Chair, Adirondack Wilderness Advocates
Erin Tobin, Executive Director, Adirondack Architectural Heritage
Mike Carr, Executive Director, Adirondack Land Trust
Daniel Kelting, Ph.D, President, Paul Smith’s College
Brendan Wiltse, Ph.D, Executive Director, Adirondack Watershed Institute
Kelley Tucker, Executive Director, Ausable Freshwater Center
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Rob Hayes, Senior Director of Clean Water, Environmental Advocates NY
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cc:

Kathryn Garcia, Director of State Operations, Executive Chamber

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Sean Mahar, Interim Commissioner, NYSDEC

Barbara Rice, Executive Director, NYSAPA

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