



21 November 2022

Governor Kathy Hochul
 Executive Chamber
 Capitol Building
 Albany, NY, 12224

Dear Governor Hochul,
The Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks collectively represent over 6.5 million acres of land or nearly a quarter of New York State. This incredible resource serves all New Yorkers by protecting public wildlands and providing recreational access for health and well-being, supporting local and state tourism and economies, and preserving intact mature forests and habitat. The Adirondack and Catskill regions are home to 200,000 residents and serve over 25 million visitors annually. In our current climate crisis, the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks serve as the lungs of New York, a great force to combat climate change as its forests provide oxygen and sequester carbon. They protect critical habitat, and provide fresh drinking water to millions of residents, including those in New York City.

The undersigned groups are **appreciative of last year’s historic commitment** to the \$400 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), and passage of the \$4.2 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act—Thank you! These are exciting accomplishments that benefit the whole state.

Thank you also for your leadership in specifically supporting the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks by providing \$8 million in dedicated funds within the nearly \$50 million of State Land Stewardship funding in the EPF. The **dedicated funding line in the EPF is an impressive step** toward meeting the vision outlined by the Catskill Park and Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Groups (CAG and HPAG), to protect wilderness, provide safe and welcoming visitor experiences, and to invest in Catskill and Adirondack communities.

To continue our progress toward this shared vision for the Catskills and Adirondacks, we urge you **in FY 23-24** to

1. **Retain the dedicated line** for the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks as an annual appropriation of \$10 million under the EPF's State Land Stewardship funding;
2. **Add and support agency staff** positions necessary to implement the use of EPF and Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act funding; and,
3. **Invest in Forest Preserve Park communities** through implementing projects funded by the Bond Act; Smart Growth initiatives; and support of Visitor Centers.

Retain the Dedicated Line

The projects supported by the Catskill and Adirondack dedicated funding line in the EPF **are not one and done projects, but ongoing needs.** For example, the Visitor Use Management projects initiated this year will be followed by planning, monitoring, and management actions; trails must be maintained and improved annually; educational stewards are needed every year to help visitors have safe experiences and to protect natural habitats; and building capacity in **Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Justice (DEIJ)** initiatives in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks will require annual investments such as by implementing the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report** led by the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC) and the Open Space Institute (OSI).

Add and Support Agency Staff

Projects cannot be implemented without staff. While we understand the current hiring challenges, we urge focusing on critical positions and exploring ways to streamline and support the hiring and retention of staff, and to create more flexibility within the system.

We are especially concerned about insufficient staffing levels in the Division of Lands and Forests. In 1996, there were 186 staff responsible for managing a total of 3,818,983 acres of public land. Today there are 170 staff who are responsible for 4,950,000 acres of public land and conservation easements. Also, during this time, three critical new programs were added: 1) climate change; 2) invasive species; and 3) conservation easements. Simultaneously, recreational use has doubled. **Acres and workload are up, and staff is down;** staff numbers in the Division of Lands and Forests should be increased.

Also adding staff in the **Division of Operations would support the 55 state public campgrounds** in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks and allow DEC to have their own **dedicated trail crews.** There is only one dedicated DEC trail crew in the Adirondack High Peaks. The Catskills and other parts of the Adirondacks do not have dedicated DEC trail crews.

Continued support for DEC Forest Rangers is needed. Thank you for hearing the call to support the New York State Forest Ranger force with their own Ranger Academy and 40 slots for new recruits in 2022. The Forest Ranger force is a critical piece of Forest Preserve recreation infrastructure. When people get lost or injured on the Forest Preserve, the Forest Rangers are there to get them safely back home. We urge support for another Forest Ranger academy in 2023 or early 2024 to stay ahead of attrition due to promotions and retirements.

Continued support for the Adirondack Park Agency is needed. The Adirondack Park Agency is tasked with long-range planning for 20% of the state of New York. It is a model for planning agencies across the country and the world. Thank you for the large capital appropriation last year which will allow the APA to construct a new headquarters. Now we request that you continue to assist the agency in filling open positions to bring them back up to a fully staffed level.

Invest in Forest Preserve Park Communities

Healthy Parks require Healthy Communities. Unlike other state parks, Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks contain communities where people live, work, and raise families. These communities and their businesses are part of the fabric of the Parks, and they provide lodging, food, entertainment, and emergency

services to park visitors. The **Park Towns and Villages** are integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks. As such they **need infrastructure support for quality of residential life, and for safe and enjoyable visitor experiences that help support regional economies.** In the Adirondacks, the Common Ground Alliance (CGA), and in the Catskills, the Catskill Park Coalition (CPC), regularly meet to collaborate and develop priorities on whole park issues that include the needs of communities within the park as well as recreation and ecological concerns. Smart Growth grant funding and other investments such as the Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act should be available for updating infrastructure in Forest Preserve Park communities. Funding should support clean water, affordable housing, Park-centered curricula, and infrastructure projects such as trails, community development, and scenic byways. It is also essential to support programs and opportunities in Park communities that will build capacity in **DEIJ**, such as the work of the Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI), and the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report.**

Visitor Centers support communities. Five privately funded, privately run visitor centers in the Forest Preserve Parks address stewardship and promote communities, including the Catskills Visitor Center in Mt. Tremper, the Paul Smith's Visitor Interpretive Center, the ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb, the High Peaks Information Center at Heart Lake, and Cascade Welcome Center in North Elba. These facilities are strategically located and attract visitors traveling to popular areas. **Continued funding of these strategic centers is critical as they serve to protect the Forest Preserve, keep recreators safe, and highlight community businesses.**

Thank you for your work and leadership in caring for the great State of New York and the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks. We greatly appreciate your attention to these important requests.

Sincerely,

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