



**Statement to the New York State Legislature
Concerning the Executive Budget
January 31, 2019**

More Forest Rangers needed in this year's State Budget:

Imagine New York State's "forever wild" Forest Preserve without an admired, well-supported and trained cadre of NYS DEC Forest Rangers to take care of it. In 2018, DEC Forest Rangers conducted 346 search and rescue missions, extinguished 105 wildfires that burned a total of 845 acres, participated in 24 prescribed fires that burned and rejuvenated 610 acres, and worked on cases that resulted in 2,354 tickets or arrests.

Yet, the number of field Rangers statewide (excluding supervisors) who are educating, responding to human and natural emergencies, and patrolling and enforcing the laws protective of our public lands totals approximately the same as existed 50 years ago – 106. In that same time period, the acreage of public lands and easements has grown by one million acres, now totaling five million acres across the state. In the 250,000 acre High Peaks Wilderness region of the Adirondacks, where so many public land emergencies occur, there are 10 fewer Forest Rangers working today than were working the same area in 1971. With less than half the public land acreage to protect, Yellowstone National Park employs almost three times the number of Rangers than we do for all of our public lands across the State of New York.

The thin green line protecting New York's public lands and those who recreate there is dangerously thin. Increases in the authorized number of Forest Rangers are needed this year.

We have three requests:

1. Adirondack Wild asks the New York State Legislature to work with Governor Cuomo to secure 20 new DEC Forest Ranger positions in this year's State Budget;
2. Any new Forest Ranger personnel, other needed positions, and all proposed DEC staff additions in the executive budget should be funded through the state's General Fund, not through appropriations from the Environmental Protection Fund. The EPF should remain as intended by the State Legislature from the beginning, a source of badly needed capital funds for New York's environment, not a source for DEC staff salaries as proposed in the executive budget;

3. Adirondack Wild strongly supports this year's EPF proposed in the executive budget of \$300 million.

Thank you for considering our inputs this year.

More Background about the Forest Rangers:

History: The forerunners of the Forest Rangers were fire wardens charged by law in 1885 to fight forest fire by leading, organizing and equipping volunteers to extinguish any blaze. These incendiary beginnings of the force and the evolution to Forest Rangers are faithfully captured in a book by Forest Ranger Louis C. Curth published by his Department of Environmental Conservation in 1987 in honor of the 1985 Centennial of the Forest Preserve. Lou Curth writes:

“For many youths entering the employment market, their occupational choices are increasingly indoors and desk bound. Young people are horrified to see workers busy at jobs they don't care about. Compared to such choices, the job of the Forest Ranger enjoys a romantic appeal with America's young men and women unmatched by any other occupation. The idea of testing one's mettle working in a wilderness setting, and the tangible sense of accomplishment from helping to protect our natural resources has struck a responsive chord among young job seekers.”

“Forest Rangers serve as the eyes and ears of the Department of Environmental Conservation. Dealing with the public, as they do, puts them at the cutting edge of DEC and its programs, and they are constantly on the lookout for situations harmful to the environment.”

From Louis C. Curth's *The Forest Rangers: a History of the New York State Forest Ranger Force*, 1987 by the NYS DEC

The legendary Clarence Petty was a district Forest Ranger in the northern Adirondacks, where he supervised members of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). He writes in the foreword to Lou Curth's *Forest Ranger History*:

“The Forest Ranger, often working alone in remote areas under adverse conditions of weather, rugged terrain and travel, sometimes lacking needed equipment, also requires self-reliance and the ability to improvise under stressful circumstances that few other occupations demand....The public has repeatedly gone to the polls and made known the intent to see that the Forest Preserves are free of exploitation and retained in their natural unspoiled condition... We should look back with satisfaction and appreciation on the last century of forest preserve protection mandated by the electorate and implemented to a large extent by the New York State Forest Rangers, the chief protectors of the Adirondack and Catskill Preserves.”

Interactions with Rangers: It has been a privilege to interact with many admirable Forest Rangers too numerous to name, but who are imprinted on our memories. They wear their uniform with understandable pride, but also use it to best advantage. The uniform gets public attention. The best Rangers take advantage of that learning opportunity, and also possess keen knowledge of their own district, including its backcountry trails, and the people in the community they could recruit to help them on a patrol, search and rescue, forest fire or special project. The Forest Ranger is the public face of the Department of Environmental Conservation, and their ambassadorship for the forest environment really does make a positive impression and help prevent bad things from happening or from getting worse.

Adirondack Wild spends at least one day a year with Forest Rangers active in educating young people about planting trees, caring for public lands and responding to forest fire. The impressions and lessons that these young people absorb from the Rangers can be positively life changing. Each ranger involved in this vitally important educational work must also be available to immediately respond to ongoing emergencies.

An Ounce of Prevention: A few years ago we attended a meeting about a Wild Forest area of the Forest Preserve. Snowmobile trails deep in the Wild Forest were being abused and the environment damaged by ATV riders. Some of them were local, others from outside the area riding on these trails in violation of laws designed to keep wild forest wild. The Forest Ranger for that district grew up in the area and knew many in the room. During a break in the meeting, he engaged some of them. He related to them very easily having grown up with them. In a friendly manner, he explained that ATV use on the Forest Preserve is not permitted, and outside of the Preserve only pursuant to relevant highway laws. He knew he had support from other local people who were afraid to have their kids play outside because of some very reckless ATV operators.

Mostly the interactions ended in laughter, but his message got across. The Ranger took advantage of the moment, and commanded respect. Local people acknowledged he had a job to do, and that he would enforce the laws in a friendly but persistent manner. He would engage and educate first, and be tough if he had to be with repeat violators. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure was his motto. ATV abuses began to decline in that district as a result of that Ranger's efforts.

New Job Challenges Rangers are also often restricted in how often they are re-equipped, what they can spend, how many miles they can drive. Their non-personnel budget has been cut 40% from ten years ago. As one Ranger explained, "with cuts this deep, we're struggling. We are performing as Rangers, but not nearly at the level we could be."

Because Rangers must respond to a growing number of emergency incidents including search and rescue, one can be hard pressed to encounter an educational Forest Ranger on the trails or in the woods – at the very time when the recreating public is most in need of their educational services. And their jobs have become much more complex. As part of the Office of Public Protection, law enforcement has become a big part of a Forest Ranger job. Sometimes, Rangers are pulled away from their patrols and educational work

to enforce against substance abuse in crowded places like campgrounds. Respect for Ranger authority is often challenged under these circumstances, and Rangers are often thrust into potentially volatile situations.

In addition to their responsibilities on the Forest Preserve, Rangers are also now responsible for 800,000+ acres of Adirondack and other private land protected by conservation easement. Each easement area is unique in the extent, kinds and means of public access. Forest Rangers must come to know these easement conservation areas, and enforce provisions for conservation of natural resources and public access.

Balancing law enforcement responsibilities with their land stewardship obligations presses hard on each Ranger in the field, and on their supervisors. Only Forest Rangers know the wildlands best, and feel a deep sense of fulfillment and obligation to stewardship and public contact in the outdoors. As one Ranger told us, “we must remain approachable to the public.” When it comes to the Forest Preserve and other wildlands that demand care, stewardship, regular patrols and first responders, only Forest Rangers are trained and prepared to do that job with excellence. As a field ranger has told us, “you can teach enforcement, but you can’t teach a love for being in the woods, and for communicating with the public. I love this job for those reasons. I’ve learned how to do and apply law enforcement when I have to.”

Respectfully submitted,

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