

Adirondack conservation groups bring priorities to Albany

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Four Adirondack conservation organizations this week called on Gov. Andrew Cuomo to boost both public health and the Upstate economy with new investments in the Adirondack Forest Preserve and clean water. They also urged him to fix lingering problems at the Adirondack Park Agency.

“The Adirondack Park is a national treasure and the birthplace of the wilderness movement in our country,” noted the letter sent to the Governor by the groups. “We urge you to uphold the 125-year, multi-generational, bipartisan tradition of protecting the Adirondack Park. At six million acres, the Adirondack Park is the largest park in the contiguous United States. It is also the largest intact temperate deciduous forest in the world, making it a primary source of our state’s clean water, a refuge for wildlife and biodiversity, and a sponge for greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide.”

The letter was signed by Peter Bauer, Executive Director Protect the Adirondacks!, as well as William C. Janeway, Executive Director of the Adirondack Council; Michael Barrett, Executive Director of the Adirondack Mountain Club; and David Gibson, Managing Partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

The organizations asked Governor Cuomo to make the following priorities part of his Adirondack agenda in 2021:

1. **Protect Public Health and Bolster the Economy with Forest**

Preserve Investments: The Adirondack Park now welcomes more than 12 million visitors annually, and with that success, modern challenges have emerged. Our New York State Forest Rangers conduct more than one search and rescue operation per day on average and many of the most popular hiking trails are severely eroded and poorly maintained. The once pure waters flowing from the summit of Mount Marcy now test positive for E. Coli, signifying the presence of human waste. *You have collectively made significant investments in our Park system with the Parks 2020 program, but as you know, the Adirondack and Catskill Parks were not eligible for that funding. It's time to invest in the 3-million-acre public Forest Preserve in the Adirondack and Catskill parks.*

2. **Invest in the Forest Preserve:** *The State Lands Stewardship account for the Environmental Protection Fund should include \$10 million earmarked for Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve protection and stewardship.* This will help with the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) efforts to address overcrowding and substandard trail conditions through comprehensive planning, public education, and Wilderness management in the Adirondack High Peaks Wilderness area. Last year, funding was dedicated to Essex County for the purchase of shuttles. Now that those funds have been disbursed, the funding line should be repurposed to improve visitor education, services and infrastructure, expanded trail construction and maintenance, and to facilitate equitable forest preserve access.

3. **Help our Forest Rangers:** *We urge you to support our Forest Rangers with additional FTEs and funding for visitor education, trailhead and summit stewards.* In early November, DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos testified to the Division of Budget that more than 450 Search and Rescue Operations had been conducted to-date in the 2020 calendar year. Additionally, Rangers are the state's go-to experts with incident command, after being tapped to lead the initial testing response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our New York State Rangers are heroes in the truest sense, yet they continue

to do their job without the support they have requested for many years. Last year we requested that 40 new Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) be funded in the state's budget, but no new funding was provided. We recognize the challenging circumstances of this budget context, yet the need continues to grow. Increased visitation without adequate staffing and infrastructure leads to increased natural resource degradation and costly search and rescue operations.

4. **Preserve Clean Adirondack Water:** The Adirondacks host 2,800 lakes and ponds, and more than 1,500 miles of rivers, fed by an estimated 30,000 miles of brooks and streams, making clean water a signature attraction for the region and a priceless asset for the state and its residents. Your historic investments in clean water have resulted in more than \$150 million going to Adirondack communities since the creation of the Water Infrastructure Improvement Act, and that progress must continue.
5. **Strengthen Invasive Species Legislation:** *This year, we urge you to act to require mandatory boat inspection protocols in the Adirondacks and preserve funding for invasive species prevention in the Environmental Protection Fund this year to support the efforts non-profits and local governments on the frontlines of this fight.* New Yorkers are paying for a world class boat inspection and decontamination system in the Adirondacks, and rightfully so, yet it is woefully underutilized. The current statute states that boaters need to take "reasonable precautions" to clean, drain and dry their watercraft before launching into a body of water in the state. Peak weekend boat counts conducted last year at high traffic Adirondack sites yielded evidence that more than 85% of boats were passing by boat inspection stations without stopping. Many states have implemented more rigorous and comprehensive inspection and decontamination protocols than New York, but this year presents an opportunity to strengthen protections without additional costs.
6. **Invest in Clean Water and Jobs:** *Standing with more than 175 members of the Clean Water and Jobs Coalition, we urge you to once again advance the Bond Act and put it on the ballot this year. Continue funding Clean Water Infrastructure at \$1 billion per year. We were disappointed that the \$3 billion 'Restore Mother Nature' Bond Act did not make the November Ballot in 2020. In a challenging economic context, a Bond Act is precisely what is needed to spur economic growth while protecting public health in New York State. There is a once in a lifetime opportunity to protect the magnificent 36,000 acre Whitney Park Tract, and that could be made possible by an approved Bond Act.*

7. Fund a 21st Century Adirondack Lakes Survey: *Invest \$2 million for the first year of a three year, \$6 million 21st Century Adirondack Lakes Survey.* This will produce the second-ever comprehensive assessment of Adirondack waters (an estimated 1,400+ lakes). This scientific research has been and will continue to be essential for protecting the public health and the environment of all New Yorkers from cross-state (upwind) pollution, climate change, invasive species, excess road salt and other pollutants. The original Adirondack Lakes Survey of 1,469 lakes, conducted from 1984 – 1987, was the foundation for the solution to acid rain. An updated assessment or survey will be the basis for protecting the Adirondack Park’s natural resources and New York’s economy from climate change and other environmental crises.

8. Reform the Adirondack Park Agency (APA):

1. **APA Board Appointments:** *We urge the Governor and Senate to work together to bring the APA Board to its full strength and potential.* The APA Board is charged with balancing the conservation and development of the Adirondack Park. Over the last 10 years, the Agency has failed to carry out any meaningful long range or comprehensive planning, which has hampered effective management of High Peaks Wilderness overcrowding, forest fragmentation and forest health, and the protection of water quality. In December, the APA Board was rocked by the resignation of Dr. Chad Dawson, retired professor from SUNY-ESF and nationally regarded expert on public lands management. Dawson resigned out of frustration with the lack of effective planning, inadequate analyses of problems and alternatives, and cited pre-ordained decision-making by the Cuomo Administration that undermined the effectiveness of citizen Board members. Dawson has described this moment for the Agency as a crisis. In addition to filling Dawson’s seat, two additional seats expire on June 30th of this year. You have an opportunity to strengthen and diversify the Adirondack Park Agency board with as many as three new appointments. The APA is charged by state law to be an independent agency with regulatory oversight and long-range planning for the Adirondack Park. The APA board needs collective professional experience in environmental law, land use planning and ecological science. We will provide the Executive and the Senate with the names of several highly qualified and knowledgeable individuals who are ready and willing to serve on the APA.

2. **APA Reform Legislation:** *Amend and update the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) Act to make Conservation Subdivision Design mandatory for the largest subdivision applications.* We support to accomplish what would be the most important amendment to the APA Act in 45 years, which has earned the support of a broad spectrum of Adirondack stakeholders, ranging from our organizations to local government representatives to the forest products industry. Speculative, large-scale subdivisions are a threat to the ecological health of Adirondack forests, wildlife habitats, forest products resources, and outdoor recreation. The APA recently updated their permit application for large-scale subdivisions in an effort to facilitate conservation design, yet the first proposal to test this new permit application is headed in a direction that, unfortunately, validates the necessity to pass this bill into law. The practice of “conservation design” for open space planning clusters roads, utilities and housing development to ensure that natural, scenic and aesthetic resources are protected and large tracts of wildlife habitat and productive forests are not fragmented. Conservation design of large-scale subdivisions is widely used across the U.S. and in New York and needs to become mandatory within the APA Act.