Green groups seek Environmental Protection Fund increase

By Mike Lynch - Outdoors Writer, Adirondack Daily Enterprise

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Environmental organizations are asking state lawmakers to increase the Environmental Protection Fund in this year's budget.

In Gov. Andrew Cuomo's recently released budget, he allocated $157 million for the EPF, an increase of $4 million from previous years. On Monday, a collection of 13 green groups from around the state issued a press release asking for that to be increased to $200 million.

On Wednesday there was a joint legislative public hearing in Albany on the environmental conservation portion of the executive budget proposal.

"We appreciate and are pleased to see the implementation of last year's approved modest EPF restoration of $4 million to bringing the appropriation to $157 million," the Adirondack Council told state lawmakers in a written statement. "We are disappointed that, in a time of budget surplus, there appears to be a decrease in total environmental funding. There is an opportunity to invest in and restore the EPF to $200 million and that is what we support."

Green groups noted that the EPF was $250 million in 2009.

"Governor (George) Pataki allocated over $250 million to the EPF during his administration," Peter Bauer, head of Protect the Adirondacks, told the Enterprise in an email. "Under Governor Cuomo the $157 million proposed EPF is underfunded and inadequate to meet the state's major environmental challenges, such as investments in infrastructure to meet the changes and impacts from global climate change, stem the spread of invasive species, protect critical habitats and open space, and protect the waters of New York."

The EPF is used for a number of purposes, including solid waste management, waterfront revitalization, public access and stewardship, farmland protection, smart growth programs and land acquisition.

Adirondack Mountain Club Executive Director Neil Woodworth told the Enterprise that he believes the land acquisition fund needs more money. Right now that is proposed to be $20,150,000. In the last year's budget it
was $20 million. That money is used for land purchases all over the state, including to add to the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

"The amount of dollars that are available for open space acquisition could slow down the acquisition of the former Finch lands and Follensby Park," Woodworth said. "The amount of money for buying land is about, when you add up the carve-outs, is about $1 less than it was the previous year."

The state agreed in 2012 to buy 69,000 acres of former Finch Pruyn timberland from The Nature Conservancy in phases over five years. The state has gone ahead and purchased OK Slip Falls, a stretch of the Hudson River and the Essex Chain of Lakes in the first phase.

A letter from Dan Plumley and Dave Gibson of Adirondack Wild, Friends of the Forest Preserve, stated that the EPF's main revenue, the Real Estate Transfer Tax, "is accruing at the rate of hundreds of millions of dollars annually," as the state's economy picks up.

"While we appreciate the Governor's and Legislature's support for the EPF over the last two fiscal years, the need to protect forest land, seashores, wetlands, lakes, rivers, farms, local agriculture, water supplies, and prevent the spread of aquative and other invasive plant and animal species in the Adirondack North Country far outstrips the proposed $157 million."