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Audubon New York Priorities For the 2010-2011 State Budget

Audubon New York, the State program of the National Audubon Society representing 27 local Chapters and 50,000 members is deeply concerned with Governor Paterson's Executive Budget proposal for FY 2010-2011 and its impacts to New York State's environment. His proposal does little to stimulate the economy and keep people working through investing in environmental protection and restoration initiatives, and in some instances does just the opposite by disproportionately targeting environmental spending and environmental state agencies for cuts.

During these difficult fiscal times, continued investment in the restoration of New York's water, air, and open space resources can and should play an important role in the revitalization of the State economy. For instance, our State Parks are important drivers of local economies, supporting an ever growing state tourism industry by providing important local destinations for the more than 55 million people who visit them each year. Yet, the longer we wait to invest in the protection and restoration of the environment, our parks and open spaces, the more costly the problems become to fix and the return on the investment decreases. In 2010, Audubon New York strongly urges the legislature to:

Protect the Integrity of the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) *Restore Cuts, Remove Offloads, and Develop a Repayment Plan*

Audubon New York strongly urges the legislature to restore funding to the EPF to \$222 million, and restore cuts to the following important EPF programs: the Biodiversity Research Institute, Open Space Protection, Farmland Protection, Invasive Species eradication, Ocean and Great Lakes Conservation Initiative, the Finger Lakes Lake Ontario Watershed Protection Alliance, Hudson River Estuary Program and the Water Quality Improvements program. Of utmost importance to Audubon is restoring funding for the Zoos, Botanical Gardens, and Aquaria (ZBGA) program category.

In addition to restoring these cuts, Audubon New York strongly urges the legislature to remove the two new programs that were added to the EPF, and fund them from other portions of the budget. These offloads weaken the integrity of the EPF, and go against the Friends of the New York's Environment Coalition position of no new EPF categories without new funding. This year, we also stand with the Friends of New York's Environment Coalition in strongly urging the budget include a proposal to develop a multi-year repayment plan for the more than half a billion dollars that have been taken from the EPF through an annual increase in the amount of RETT revenue dedicated to the EPF.

Oppose the Moratorium on Open Space Protection and Restore Land Acquisition and Farmland Protection Funding

One of the most shortsighted and damaging proposals regarding the EPF is the Governor's proposal to place a moratorium on protecting open space, the elimination of land acquisition funding and the steep reduction in farmland protection funding. This proposal would seriously undermine efforts to advance conservation at a time when the opportunities to save the last remaining open spaces could not be greater. The EPF was created to offset habitat loss from development, and the land acquisition and farmland protection categories are pillars of this important fund. This irresponsible moratorium should be undone, funding to land acquisition and farmland improvements restored in a restored EPF, and the state commitments that have been made to organizations that have purchased land on the state's behest should be honored.

Oppose the Disproportionate Cuts to Environmental Agency Budgets

The Executive Budget proposal disproportionately cuts environmental Agency budgets and staffing. In particular, the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) budget is cut by 34%, and the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) budget is cut by an additional 20%, while other agencies like the State Education Department and Department of Health are only cut by 2% and 1% respectively. These draconian cuts to the EPF and environmental Agency budgets are the wrong course of action, and put at risk many projects across the state that help restore the environment and provide for ecotourism opportunities, further compounding the economic woes facing not-for-profit organizations and local governments.

Utilize ‘Obesity Tax’ to Offset Cuts to State Parks

Many emerging studies are showing that Parks and open space help keep people healthier and play an important role in combating the obesity epidemic. However, Governor Paterson’s budget Cuts vital funding to parks which will lead many state parks closing their doors at a time when more people are looking to recreate closer to home and get outside and be active. We strongly urge that a portion of the proposed “obesity tax” revenue be dedicated to OPRHP to offset the cuts to their budgets, keep parks open and develop new initiatives programs with the Department of Health to combat obesity and inspire children and their parents to get outside.

Promote and Expand Ecotourism Opportunities

Bird and wildlife watching is the fastest growing outdoor recreation in New York State, with over 3.8 million birdwatchers contributing over \$1.6 billion to the state economy each year! To enhance the state’s image as a destination for bird and wildlife watching, Audubon New York urges the state to create an “I BIRD NY” program, similar to other “I Love New York” campaigns. Such an initiative should provide promotional assistance to local governments in their efforts to promote ecotourism and wildlife watching opportunities, and enhance promotion of voluntary conservation funding programs like the Habitat Access Stamp and Return a Gift to Wildlife program.

Consider Other Revenue Generating Ideas

To increase revenues in the state, and offset negative environmental damages, Audubon urges the creation of a clean water surcharge on the sale of non agricultural, aesthetic lawn care pesticides and fertilizers, which could be used to generate additional funds for water quality improvements and wastewater infrastructure upgrades. Additionally, the state should consider instituting application fees for permits to modify freshwater wetlands.

Expand Severance Tax for Natural Gas Drilling

To offset the many negative and destructive environmental impacts from expanded drilling for natural gas, strong mitigation requirements and funding must be put in place. Audubon New York strongly believes that any severance tax considered by the state must apply not only to expanded drilling, but to existing wells already in production and provide funds for the protection of unfragmented forests, restoration of wetland habitat, and improvement of water quality, in addition to providing increased staff to the DEC and other agencies. The Governor’s proposed severance tax does not go far enough to mitigate for the environmental destruction that will occur if this expanded drilling is allowed, and must be amended to ensure this funding is used to protect and restore New York’s environment.

Oppose the Elimination of Certain Boards and Commissions (S.6613/A.9713)

We urge the legislature to retain the Bird Conservation Area Advisory Committee and Invasive Species Advisory Council, neither of which have any state costs associated with them.

For more information on these proposals and to see a copy our budget testimony, please visit:

http://ny.audubon.org/PDFs/Testimony_10_11.pdf, or contact Sean Mahar, Director of Government Relations (smahar@audubon.org / 518-869-9731).