



Adirondack Landowners Association ☼ Adirondack Mountain Club ☼ American Forest Foundation ☼ Audubon New York ☼ Business Council of New York State ☼ Catskill Center ☼ Catskill Mountaineer ☼ The Conservation Fund ☼ Earthjustice ☼ Empire State Forest Products Association ☼ Forest Resources Association ☼ Hardwood Federation ☼ Land Trust Alliance ☼ National Alliance of Forest Owners ☼ Natural Resources Defense Council ☼ The Nature Conservancy ☼ New York Farm Bureau ☼ New York Forest Owners ☼ New York Society of American Foresters ☼ Open Space Institute ☼ Sustainable Forestry Initiative, Inc.

October 30, 2017

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York State  
New York State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo,

The undersigned organizations – one of the broadest coalitions ever formed in support of New York’s forests, with national, regional, state-wide, and local organizations from the business, farm, environmental, energy, and land conservation communities -- **urge you to fulfill your 2017 State of the State commitment to establish the Empire Forest for the Future Initiative (EFFI), and put forward an Executive Budget that funds the EFFI and support its enactment as part of the 2018-19 State budget.**

We thank you for your demonstrated leadership and commitment to protecting New York’s environment. We are grateful for the historic level of investment provided through the 2017-2018 Enacted budget to protect and enhance our shared natural resources. The \$300 million for the Environmental Protection Fund, the record level of investments in our State Parks, the \$2.5 billion funding for drinking water and wastewater infrastructure projects, coupled with your leadership on climate change, solidifies New York’s national leadership in demonstrating that protecting the environment, investing in a robust economy, and ensuring peoples’ health and well-being are intertwined.

We now ask you to continue this leadership by ensuring that the EFFI is enacted. The EFFI would create a program that incentivizes private forest landowners to reduce the conversion of forests to non-forest uses, and encourages sustainable forest management on privately owned lands for the benefit of the State’s people, economy, environment, communities and climate.

### **Key Elements of the Empire Forests for the Future Initiative**

The EFFI as outlined in your State of the State address has four key elements, which our diverse coalition supports.

- Fixes to the property tax shift associated with the current Real Property Tax Law (RPTL) section 480-a where such taxing jurisdictions are impacted.
- Creates a new RPTL section 480-b which would:
  - Decrease the required eligible acres from 50 acres to 25 acres (of which 10 would need to be forested) to be eligible for tax relief;
  - Expand the eligible acres of forest and related lands (e.g. steep slopes, water bodies, wetlands, etc.) to be included in the program;

- Expand the range of forest management activities eligible for tax abatement under the new 480-b to include management for enhancing or preserving carbon sequestration, protecting water quality and quantity, and increasing wildlife habitat and conservation; and
- Provide financial relief to those taxing jurisdictions significantly impacted by the new 480-b program.
- Creates two new grant programs for private forest land stewardship and for community forests; and
- Creates a state procurement preference for New York wood products.

### **Benefits of the EFFI**

EFFI offers New York many important benefits, which is why this unprecedented coalition is supporting its enactment in 2018.

#### **New York can obtain significant carbon benefits through the EFFI.**

The EFFI would provide enormous carbon storage benefits. A recent study by the Nature Conservancy calculated that forest land eligible for preservation support under a new RPTL 480-b would sequester about 1.3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide, the equivalent of the annual emissions of over half of the coal fired power plants in the nation. Of course, not all of these lands would immediately be put into stewardship under any scenario, but the same study found that assuming enrollment significantly increases with a new 480-b, the increased carbon sequestration would equal about **3.3 million tons of carbon dioxide per year** – the equivalent of the emissions of over 250,000 homes. This is a significant carbon benefit.

#### **New York can show national leadership in state action to address climate change.**

At a time when many in the federal government cannot understand that addressing climate change does not require conceding economic prosperity, state leadership is critically important.

Reforming New York's forest tax program would help establish a national model. Many, and likely most, states have some form of law to encourage the management and timbering of private forest land. Most have not been updated or reformed, and continue to focus on creating incentives for timbering. If New York reforms its forest tax program, other states will have another tool to employ against climate change.

#### **The over 200,000 New Yorkers with over ten acres of forest strongly support expanding the range of eligible management activities.**

The current 480-a program is not working optimally. Participation is about 19 percent of our eligible acres, in contrast to our neighboring states. For example, New Hampshire and Vermont have over 50 percent of eligible acres enrolled in their programs. New York's low participation is likely due to the narrow range of management options.

New York is missing a tremendous opportunity to increase its participation through a broader 480-b program that encourages landowners to manage their forest lands for other reasons. Specifically, according to a recent survey of the over 680,000 forest landowners in New York, the top reasons for holding their land include beauty, wildlife, water, and recreation. Fewer than 25 percent list timber as a priority. At the same time, about 95 percent view taxes as their main concern, ahead of invasive species,

water, insects and climate change. Forest owners hope to leave a legacy for their families, and tax reform can help make this possible.

**New York can support and expand an important economic sector.**

Maintaining forests as forest is good for New York's economy. New York's forest products produce a net economic benefit of over **\$22 billion** dollars and the sector employs over 100,000 New Yorkers with family supporting wages. Forest-related tourism and recreation alone contribute over **\$8 billion** per year to the New York economy supporting 32,000 jobs. Further supporting the strong interest of New Yorkers in preserving their forests for beauty and wildlife, wildlife-related recreation alone adds over **\$4 billion** annual to New York.

**New York can protect water quality and quantity.**

It is well established by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) that preserving watersheds is among the best ways to ensure high quality drinking water for New Yorkers. Forest lands comprise a substantial, and growing, portion of the acreage in our watersheds, which ensures a supply of safe, clean drinking water for about 15 million New Yorkers. Forest lands also act as sponges, retaining water that can then be slowly released, reducing the threats of drought and minimizing the devastating impacts of floods.

**New York can fulfill its policy goals.**

The 2010 DEC Forest Resource Assessment and Strategy provides as a key goal, "keeping forests as forests." With 75 percent, or 14.2 million acres, of New York forests in private hands, New York cannot accomplish this goal without greater participation by the private sector – primarily the hundreds of thousands of families who overwhelmingly want to keep "woods as woods." The EFFI will expand the incentive for maintaining forests as forests in accordance with landowners' preferences.

In sum, there is no bigger benefit, nor larger return on investment, for carbon sequestration, forest health, the protection of water quality and improvements to wildlife habitat and New York's forest economy, than an investment in New York's forests. The availability of forest resources for recreation, timber, carbon storage, and a host of additional ecosystem benefits are determined by management decisions made by these diverse owners. The EFFI provides a cost effective way to addresses critical conservation needs through private land management while also supporting local economies.

Over the past several years, we have worked with your Administration and various stakeholders to generate support for the EFFI. **We urge you to act quickly in proposing the EFFI to the Legislature and for the public's consideration, and including it in the Executive Budget, in order to enact the EFFI into law in 2018.**

Our organizations would enthusiastically champion the EFFI as a comprehensive and complete forest initiative with the Legislature and engage our vast networks in support of the proposal. We would like to meet with you or your staff as soon as possible to discuss how best to enact the EFFI in 2018 and to bring its progressive benefits to New York's forests, forest landowners and forest related economy.

Thank you again for your leadership on environmental and economic issues and we stand ready to work shoulder to shoulder with you to ensure the enactment of the EFFI in 2018.

Sincerely,

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