



2-1-23

Rafaela Cardoso
Governor's Aide - Outreach
Office of the Governor
225 West State Street
Trenton, New Jersey 08608

Re: 2023 Budget and Funding and State Parks and Forests

Dear Ms. Cardoso,

We are writing on behalf of the Fix Our Parks Coalition and the millions of people who visit State Parks, Wildlife Management Areas, Historic Sites, Forests, and Preserves in New Jersey. Our coalition has been aiding the State Parks, Forests, and other public lands by bringing volunteers and private funding to help park superintendents and managers repair the damage wrought by illegal dumping, illegal off-road vehicle use, and general maintenance needs. Based on this experience, much more funding is necessary to maintain the quality of experience within state lands that our residents deserve.

Unlike so many places of recreation, State Parks, Forests, Historic Sites, Preserves, and Wildlife Management Areas are free for everyone to enjoy. For many, public lands are their only way to get into natural settings and enjoy recreational activities like swimming, hiking, boating, hunting, and fishing. Throughout the pandemic, New Jerseyans enjoyed our public lands in record numbers. The maintenance backlog and continuing destruction harms all New Jersey residents, limiting their ability to enjoy the lands they purchased and placing both public users and state employees, like firefighters, at risk. Although New Jersey has dedicated billions of dollars to acquiring public open space in the past three decades, the funding for operating, maintaining, and protecting state open space declined during the same time span.

Pinelands Preservation Alliance commissioned Dr. Michael Van Clef of Ecological Solutions LLC., to conduct an assessment of New Jersey's public lands management. His extensive research and dozens of interviews found that there is a backlog of repairs, maintenance, and stewardship close to \$600 million for the state's public lands and that overall public land acreage continues to increase while personnel continue to decrease. New Jersey falls significantly below the national average and neighboring states on per capita spending on public lands. The report identified the urgent need for increased annual funding and staffing for operations, including more resources to enforce existing laws against rampant illegal dumping and illegal off-road vehicle use harming wetlands, stream banks, and roads. The report is available at fixourparksnj.org.

The Fix Our Parks Campaign proposes to increase the state budget by \$16 million annually for operations and law enforcement, to \$52 million annually, on par with the national average, and

increase capital spending by \$40 million annually, to \$60 million annually, to end the \$600 million dollar maintenance backlog in ten years by 2033. These investments would improve safe and health-giving recreation opportunities in urban, suburban, and rural areas, and leverage private donations with state funds.

Safe and accessible State Parks, Forests, Historic Sites, Preserves, and Wildlife Management Areas are valuable to everyone, as time in nature is an important determinant of emotional and physical health. They are also important to the State's economy and support thousands of jobs. Wetlands provide over \$10 billion in economic value annually from flood protection. Forests provide over \$2 billion in economic value from habitat, water supply, and recreation. Wildlife-related Tourism, including hunting and fishing, produces \$3 billion in annual gross economic activity.

Without a dedication to supporting our State Parks, Forests, Historic Sites, Preserves, and Wildlife Management Areas, we will continue to see a steady decline in their use and thus dollars spent in New Jersey. Please make it a priority to fix our parks now and secure a legacy of support for New Jersey's precious public lands.

Sincerely,

Tom Gilbert
Co-Executive Director
New Jersey Conservation Foundation

Peter Dolan
Trail Program Manager
NY/NJ Trail Conference

Linda Barth
President
D&R Canal Watch

Carleton Montgomery
Executive Director
Pinelands Preservation Alliance

Alan Hunt, PhD
Director of Policy and Grants
Musconetcong Watershed Association

Fred Akers
Operations Manager
Great Egg Harbor Watershed Association

Eileen Murphy, PhD
Vice President, Government Relations
NJ Audubon

Ed Potosnak
Executive Director
New Jersey League of Conservation Voters

Julia M. Somers
Executive Director
NJ Highlands Coalition

William Kibler
Director of Policy
Raritan Headwaters

Karla Rossini
Executive Director
Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River

Kyle Richter
Executive Director
Lake Hopatcong Foundation

Cindy Kunnas
Projects Coordinator
Delaware River Greenway Partnership

Jennifer Orr-Greene
Eastern Policy Director
Trout Unlimited

Mark Zakutansky
Director of Conservation Policy Engagement
Appalachian Mountain Club

Robert von Zumbusch
President
Millstone Valley Preservation Coalition

Marsha Benovengo
Chair
New Jersey State Council of Trout Unlimited

Nikki Ghorpade
Manager, Government Affairs
Ducks Unlimited

Joe Macasek
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Canal Society of New Jersey

Anjuli Ramos-Busot
Director
Sierra Club New Jersey Chapter

Martin Grossman
President
Paulinskill Valley Trail Committee