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New York State Assembly Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation Assembly Subcommittee on Oversight of the Department of Environmental Conservation

Hearing on Impact of the 2013-2014 State Budget on the Department of Environmental Conservation & Need for a New Environmental Bond Act

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Thank you, Chairman Sweeney, for this opportunity to comment on the 2013-2014 State Budget and the proposed Environmental Bond Act.

In New York, the Land Trust Alliance serves as a leader, convener, partner, and technical assistance provider to a network of over 90 local nonprofit land trusts. Our extensive involvement with New York's land trusts gives us a keen insight into the benefits of the Environmental Protection Fund and the role that public-private initiatives such as the Conservation Partnership Program have in advancing the state's environmental conservation and economic development goals.

Capital investments in our air, water, farmland, and open space assets fit hand in hand with efforts to spur regional economic development and to avoid costly public health and environmental impacts. In the end, a strong EPF and a vibrant statewide network of local and regional land trusts will make New York a more attractive place to live, work and visit. Such a scenario is good for our economy and good for our communities.

Impact of 2013-2014 State Budget on DEC

Chairman Sweeney, we applaud you and your Assembly colleagues for your leadership and perseverance as champions of environmental funding in New York State. Together with Governor Cuomo, the Legislature ensured a \$19 million increase in the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) this year, the first increase since 2008.

While the EPF is still \$100 million short of where it was five years ago, this year's increased funding level is a positive and appreciated step in the right direction. As the Committee understands quite well, the need to invest robustly to preserve New York's air, water, land and natural resources has only increased, especially in the wake of recent extreme weather events.

Celebrating Ten Years – The New York State Conservation Partnership Program

We are grateful for this Committee's work to gain traction toward rebuilding the Environmental Protection Fund. This year's budget includes \$82,495,000 for the Open Space programs; the State Budget includes sustained funding at \$1.575 million for the Conservation Partnership Program. For several years in a row now, funding at this level has allowed the program to stabilize and mature.

Today it is one of the most impactful programs in New York advancing natural area and farmland preservation. In my remarks I will offer a brief update on the program and highlight how it is building the capacity of land trusts in local communities and fostering innovative conservation programs around the state.

The Conservation Partnership Program is funded through the EPF and provides competitive matching grants and targeted technical assistance to nonprofit land conservation and stewardship organizations around the state. It is administered by the Land Trust Alliance's New York program, in coordination with the Division of Lands and Forest at the Department of Environmental Conservation.

This innovative public-private initiative was launched a decade ago and we're seeing dramatic results, to the benefit of millions of New Yorkers. Through our collaboration with the DEC, communities served by local land trusts have an important opportunity to engage private landowners in efforts to conserve and enhance our most important natural resources – prime agricultural soils and local farms; lakes, streams, wetlands, municipal watersheds and aquifers; working forests and critical wildlife habitat; fragile coastal areas and estuaries.

The Conservation Partnership Program also encourages local communities across the state to leverage private capital and local funding to preserve special places that support public health and quality of life amenities. This includes areas such as community gardens in Harlem and the Bronx, Kingston, Albany, Troy and Buffalo; recreational areas, parks, nature preserves and multi-purpose amenities such as the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail; and scenic areas vital to New York's tourism industry, from the beaches of Long Island to the Finger Lakes and Adirondacks.

DEC Commissioner Martens commended the Conservation Partnership Program at this year's grants announcement, which was hosted by the Mohonk Preserve in New Paltz:

"These grants will go a long way in the conservation of private lands and will result in significant environmental and economic benefits for communities throughout New York. The Conservation Partnership Program is unique in the nation." Commissioner Martens continued, "The State's investment in building land trust capacity multiplies several times in benefits to local communities, improving both the local economy and environment."

The Conservation Partnership Program enables local land trusts to develop and improve their education and landowner outreach services. The grants leverage additional millions to advance regional economic development goals and strengthen partnerships with local and state governments while supporting locally and regionally driven efforts to preserve farmland, clean water, and green infrastructure around the state.

With the Legislature's support of this program, land trusts are increasingly well-positioned to implement best practices and to prepare for accreditation, supporting our and New York State's commitment to ensuring accountability, good governance, and adherence to rigorous national standards.

The program generates a substantial return on investment through matching contributions. To date, the program has leveraged over \$14 million in local funding, more than doubling the impact of the state's investment. While modestly funded, we've been told by agency staff and legislators that few programs match the efficiency and return on investment achieved from this model EPF program.

2013-2014 Conservation Partnership Program Report

As stated, the Conservation Partnership Program received a \$1.575 million EPF appropriation in the FY 2013-2014 State Budget. (Last fiscal year's appropriation will enable the Alliance to launch an 11th round of the grants program this month, with grants to be awarded in April 2014.)

Ninety percent of the appropriated funds [\$1,417,500] are strictly dedicated to the competitive land trust grants program. Budget language for the program stipulates that no more than ten percent [\$157,500] of the total appropriation may be used for administrative costs.

In 2012 and 2013, the Conservation Partnership Program awarded 145 grants totaling \$2.8 million to more than 60 organizations, from Long Island to Lake Erie. In just the past two years, the program has leveraged \$2.5 million in additional matching funds, resulting in permanent conservation of nearly 5,000 acres of priority open space and numerous initiatives to strengthen local partnerships, help kids and families connect to nature, and enhance public access to trails, lakes and rivers.

As important as these land protection activities are, the funding also enables land trusts to provide valuable services such as outreach, stewardship, and environmental education programs to landowners, families, schools, planners and entire communities.

The Alliance adheres to a strategic focus and measures the performance of the Conservation Partnership Program in meaningful ways:

Critical Lands Conserved

Through the Conservation Partnership Program, land trusts are not only accelerating the pace of land conservation in New York, they are also being more strategic, targeting and preserving lands that matter most for farming, tourism, outdoor recreation and other public purposes.

Data collected by the Land Trust Alliance shows that land conservation by nonprofit land trusts across the United States is thriving, with more than 10 million acres conserved from 2005 to 2010. Land trusts in New York contributed to this success, reporting an increase of 88% in acres conserved over this period. Land trusts in New York have protected more than 970,000 acres, ranking 6th in the nation in acres conserved.

For example, with funding from the Conservation Partnership Program, Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust is partnering with Fort Drum and local landowners to preserve a buffer around the installation. This win-win approach provides an opportunity for local farmers to sell their development rights while ensuring the long term viability of Fort Drum's training grounds, a top priority for the North Country Economic Development Council.

Building Community Engagement

According to the Land Trust Alliance's 2010 census, there are now more than 90 land trusts operating in New York. With catalytic funding from the Conservation Partnership Program, New York land trusts have created over 100 new jobs in recent years.

New York's land trusts are also engaging more members of their community than ever before. Land trusts in New York now count 6,000 active volunteers, a 42% increase since 2005. They draw direct support from more than 71,000 members and donors. Through the Conservation Partnership Program, land trusts are developing strong community-based programs that can benefit everyone in their service area.

For example, Brooklyn Queens Land Trust is using a Conservation Partnership Program grant to strengthen gardener programs and outreach services to the 32 gardens it owns. With targeted funding and technical assistance, BQLT has developed into a dynamic organization with 500 volunteers who have are responsible for a thriving network of community gardens from Park Slope to Bedford Stuyvesant, Cambria Heights and Jamaica Plains.

Organizational Excellence

Guided by the Alliance's strategic plan, the Conservation Partnership Program offers targeted funding for organizations to implement best practices and work toward accreditation. The program provides an effective external driver for organizations to commit to rigorous national standards which ensures that they will be more effective and sustainable in the long run.

The Conservation Partnership Program incentivizes a deep commitment to best practices that translates into durable and well governed nonprofit organizations. We are pleased to report that the Conservation Partnership Program has supported all 20 accredited local and regional land trusts that operate across the state, from Westchester County to the Thousand Islands. Looking ahead, nine additional New York land trusts applied for accreditation in 2013 or have registered to apply for accreditation in 2014. (Only one state – California – has more accredited land trusts.)

In the Capital Region, several local organizations are leading the way – Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy, Rensselaer Land Trust, Columbia Land Conservancy, and the

Agricultural Stewardship Association in Washington County are among 230 organizations nationally that have met the demanding standards of accreditation. Several other area organizations, including Lake George Land Conservancy and Saratoga PLAN are also committed to accreditation in the next year.

The commitment of these and other New York land trusts to accreditation in New York ensures that state resources are invested in a responsible manner with a consistent focus on strategic results and rigorous national standards.

Measuring Impact & Looking Ahead

The Alliance is currently conducting an independent program evaluation, led by Conservation Impact, Inc. The comprehensive six-month evaluation is gathering insights and feedback from land trusts and stakeholders around the state to assess the full impact of the program over the past ten years. What we hear is that the program has been transformative for a diverse array of organizations, and it has had demonstrable impact in terms of strengthening community- and landowner-driven efforts to conserve local areas prioritized in New York's Open Space Plan.

Importantly, we are also asking the evaluators to develop recommendations to help guide this grants and technical assistance program going forward. What should the next ten years of this pioneering initiative look like?

We have invited Chairman Sweeney as well as Senator Grisanti to participate in the evaluation, and we welcome additional feedback from other members of the Committee. If Committee members wish to provide additional insights and suggestions, we would be happy to assist with that.

Need for a New Environmental Bond Act

The Alliance strongly supports your efforts to increase funding for the environment in New York. As others have testified, there is a tremendous need for environmental conservation funding across the state. The proposed \$5 billion Clean Water/Clean Air/Green Jobs Act of 2014 is both visionary and necessary if we are to meet the enormous capital challenge of preserving, enhancing, restoring and improving the quality of New York's environment.

We are particularly impressed with the proposal's emphasis on water quality, watershed protection, environmental health in urban communities, and climate change adaptation. With the development of New York's land trust community over the past decade, much of it spurred by investments through the EPF as discussed above, New York has a special opportunity now to leverage these community partners and other supporting organizations as never before.

Across the nation, voters of all political leanings have given overwhelming approval in recent years to measures that will raise revenue for capital investments that benefit the environment, support public health, and create green jobs. In the 2012 election cycle, 46 of 57 measures on local and statewide passed, an approval rate of 81%. According to the Trust for Public Land, voter-approved measures in 21 states passed last year, creating more than \$2 billion in new funding to support protection of water quality, new parks and natural areas and working farms and ranches.

There is every reason to believe that voters in New York will stand behind a robust proposal that positions the Empire State once again as a national leader in environmental protection.

As others have highlighted, New York's 1996 environmental bond act passed with strong public support and led to important investments in water quality, farmland preservation and open space protection. The new Environmental Bond Act proposal underscores the need to invest substantially and soon to confront New York's looming environmental challenges.

We applaud Chairman Sweeney and Senator Grisanti for initiating this process to engage New Yorkers on this timely bond act proposal. The Land Trust Alliance and our land trust partners across the state look forward to engaging in this discussion moving forward. At the same time we strongly support further substantial steps to restore the Environmental Protection Fund in the next State Budget.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

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