

Diverse Coalition Applauds Executive Budget Proposal to Reform Forest Tax Law

'Empire Forests for the Future Initiative' Will Create Jobs, Conserve Forests & Wildlife Habitat and Mitigate Climate Change

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A diverse coalition of forest product, business, agriculture, conservation, and environmental organizations today applauded Governor Andrew Cuomo for including in his Executive Budget proposal a reform of the state's Forest Tax Abatement Program—creating new incentives for sustainable management of private forestlands while also conserving and creating Community Forests.

The Empire Forests for the Future Initiative would amend real property tax law to streamline processes for private forestland owners who are currently in a tax abatement program authorized under section 480-a, and create a new program that would open participation to landowners with 25 or more acres. The provision would also create two ways to participate, through enrollment in a third-party certified sustainability program or through a state-approved plan for sustainable management action, which can enhance forest habitat for wildlife, water quality or sequester carbon. It would also allow for the inclusion of limited non-forested open space in the program and a formula for state-funded relief for local governments that, in some cases, are currently forced to shift the tax burdens of privately-held forest lands to other local taxpayers.

"We want to thank Governor Cuomo for bringing forward his Empire Forest for the Future Initiative as part of his 2019 Executive Budget proposal," said **John Bartow, Executive Director of the Empire State Forest Products Association**. "For over a decade we have been working on efforts to reform forest property taxes and initiate new incentives which benefit New York's private forest landowners and the forest products industry in general. The Governor has packaged a number of incentives and inducements that go a long way in bringing these to fruition and we look forward to working with the Governor and Legislature during this budget in making these a reality."

"Governor Cuomo's proposed reforms are a win for private forest landowners; a win for our forest based economy; and, a win for wildlife, clean air, and water quality," said **Jessica Ottney Mahar, New York policy director for The Nature Conservancy**. "Last week, a group of uncommon allies – including national, regional, state-wide, and local organizations – came together to support this proposal to protect New York's forests and their contributions to natural defenses against climate change. The Nature Conservancy is proud to partner with these businesses, farms, environmental, energy, land conservation communities and a broad and bi-partisan group of New York State legislators to support these reforms."

"Private forests support the vast majority of New York's birds and other wildlife," said **Michael Burger, Director of Conservation and Science for Audubon New York**. "Thanks to Governor Cuomo's Empire Forests for the Future Initiative, private forest owners will have the incentives and resources they need to conserve and properly manage their lands for the benefit of birds, other wildlife, and the people of New York."

The Empire Forest for the Future Initiative would also create two new \$500,000 grant programs in the Environmental Protection Fund to support forest conservation and stewardship: One would provide grants to municipalities and not-for-profit organizations to purchase and create Community Forests, valuable natural assets locally, creating timber revenue, recreational opportunities, and wildlife habitat. The other would encourage forest owners to engage in sustainable stewardship practices,

complementing federal funding for private forestland conservation and actions taken by landowners who may enroll in carbon markets.

The reforms advanced by Governor Cuomo in the Executive Budget Proposal would encourage sustainable forest management on privately owned lands to the benefit of New York's people, economy, environment, communities, and climate. Under the existing laws, just 16 percent of eligible forest lands have been enrolled for property tax benefits. Stakeholders plan to work with legislators throughout the budget process to ensure negotiations result in reforms being included in the enacted budget. Together, these programs provide a suite of options that would allow forest owners to leverage resources and conserve their lands while providing the greatest public benefit to New York.

"Forested land on farms helps support the agricultural and rural economy in New York State," said **Jeff Williams, Director of Public Policy for New York Farm Bureau**. "We are appreciative of Governor Cuomo's support of the Empire Forests for the Future Initiative and the incentives to better manage forest land in the farm community."

"Governor Cuomo's budget contains a clear affirmation of the significant economic, environmental and societal benefits of New York's forest lands," said **Darren Suarez, Director of Government Affairs for The Business Council of New York State, Inc.** "The proposal to reform the 480-a Timber Tax law will reduce barriers to participation and has the added benefit of increasing the amount of managed private forest lands. We are pleased to join our fellow supporters of New York's private forest lands in backing the inclusion of the Empire Forest for the Future Initiative in this year's budget."

"Forests pull carbon dioxide out of the air and store it in plants and soils, while also providing recreation and wildlife habitat and protecting water quality," said **Peter Lehner, Senior Attorney with Earthjustice**. "The forest tax reform will help all landowners use their lands as climate stewards, by managing their forests to enhance carbon storage and watershed protection. This will be a national milestone in climate change policy."

"The Empire Forests for the Future Initiative is an important initiative that will enhance our coalition efforts to protect water quality and protect crucial forested lands. We applaud Governor Cuomo for including the Empire Forests for the Future Initiative in the 2018 budget." **Ramsay Adams, Executive Director, Catskill Mountainkeeper**.

"Many thanks to Governor Cuomo for advancing this plan to strengthen private forest ownership in New York State. Healthy forests support healthy communities by offering recreational opportunities and the protection of natural resources and habitats. If enacted, these reforms will dramatically increase the spread of private land conservation and quality forest management, while reducing the burden of abatement programs on local governments," said **Kim Elliman, president and CEO of the Open Space Institute**.

"The Empire Forest for the Future Initiative will incentivize the creation of community forests protecting open space, wildlife habitat, and creating new opportunities for outdoor recreation. The revised 480 Forest Tax Program will provide for well managed forests, enhance water quality, and promote the sequestration of carbon while providing vital property tax relief for local governments. A win all the way around", said **Neil Woodworth, Executive Director and Counsel for the Adirondack Mountain Club**.