



New York City Council

Oversight: Preventing Brush Fires in Parks

Committee on Parks and Recreation jointly with the Committee on Fire and Emergency Management

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My name is Emily Walker, and I am the Senior Manager of External Affairs at the Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC). Thank you to Chair Krishnan, Chair Ariola, and the members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation and the Committee on Fire and Emergency Management for the opportunity to speak today.

As champions for NYC's natural areas, we care deeply about the care and condition of our forests, and were alarmed and disheartened to see the devastating impacts of drought conditions last fall, which led to the spate of brush fires in parks and natural areas across the five boroughs.

The timing of the drought and brush fires happened to coincide with the elimination of 51 forest management positions for the Natural Resources Group in the FY25 Adopted Budget for NYC Parks. These positions constituted approximately 80% of the agency's workforce that care for the 12,000 acres of natural areas and forests in our city's parks. The NRG division also lost funding for 26 staff lines in the FY24 November Budget Modification that had been allocated to create the first-ever citywide trails team to care for our 300-mile network of nature trails.

As a stopgap measure to keep critical staff in place in the wake of the FY25 budget cuts, 22 of the eliminated staff lines had been shifted onto Federal grant funding via the Inflation Reduction Act. With this week's freeze on Federal grants, these positions are once again in peril. This precarious staffing for the division of Parks that plays such a critical role in contributing to the climate health of our city reflects a shameful lack of urgency from our decisionmakers at every level of representation, and we are here today to ask that the Council take the strongest stand possible to ensure that this funding is made whole in the FY26 budget.

The brush fires we experienced last fall are a stark reminder of the city's vulnerability to climate change, and of the city's ongoing failure to invest critical funding for natural areas management. We strongly believe that better staffed and maintained natural areas are safer for public access and more ecologically resilient. For these reasons, it is urgent and necessary that more be done to ensure that critical funding is restored for staff lines eliminated in the FY24 and FY25 budgets to both to proactively care for, program, and manage our natural areas and forests for the future.

While improved staffing wouldn't have prevented the drought itself, Parks has for too long been operating with minimal resources to do critical management, restoration, and monitoring in our natural areas during this era of climate instability. With increased staffing, NRG would be able to do more work to control and suppress the spread of invasive species that leave our forests more vulnerable to fire, such as phragmites and mugwort. Both of these plants have a tendency to grow in abundance in our more neglected natural areas, outcompeting native understory plants.



for space, and increasing the fuel load in our forests, particularly in times of drought. These plants require a high-level of specialized maintenance to keep in check, and with the current level of staff in NRG, that work has been not able to keep pace with the need.

As our colleagues at NYC Parks assess the damage from these fires, adequate staff will be critically needed to ensure that the spaces that experienced fires last fall can be restored and monitored appropriately, with considerations of soil stabilization and erosion control, and climate-adapted replanting plans. With the current level of funding for the NRG, that work will not be able to take place without significantly offsetting other planned work for the division.

These fires have made clear that it is more urgent than ever that NYC and its elected officials take meaningful action by adequately funding the care of our forests and natural areas, which provide a high level of benefits relative to their investment. Our natural areas are home to 5 million of NYC's 7 million trees, they absorb 22% of its stormwater and 70% of its carbon, and can also be up to 13 degrees cooler than nearby street trees during extreme heat events. We know that healthier forests help create a healthier climate, and that failing to invest in our natural areas will leave NYC more vulnerable to flooding, extreme heat, and now fire.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to express our support for increased investment in NYC Parks and their natural areas.

