



**New York City Council
Oversight: FY26 Preliminary Budget Hearing for NYC Parks
Committee on Parks and Recreation
March 20, 2025**

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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 and the members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation for the opportunity to speak today.

Despite the strong support of the Council last year, NYC Parks lost nearly 80% of the staff lines that care for our 12,000 acres of natural forests, wetlands, and trails. The timing, as it turned out, could not have been worse. Last fall we experienced a drought that resulted in hundreds of brush fires throughout our forested natural areas citywide. The unprecedented scale of these fires caused a strain on our Parks staff, conservancy partners, and the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) when managing the spread of these dangerous blazes and assessing the damage.

We are here today to state in the strongest terms possible that the Mayor's Office must restore and baseline \$5 million to make permanent 76 staff lines for forest and trails management. These positions would add urgently needed capacity for the Parks Department's Natural Resources Group to ensure that our forested natural areas are better managed and restored, and that our public nature trails are better maintained for safe public access. We urge the City Council to throw their full weight behind this investment in NYC Parks and its natural areas.

This is both a watershed and vulnerable moment for our urban forest. Under the new federal administration, it's clear that cities will need to take strong leadership on climate and resiliency issues. There are currently 22 natural areas staff whose positions are being covered through federal funding that's now at risk due to the budget cuts and grant freezes coming from DC. We are also now working closely with partners, including the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice, on the creation of NYC's first-ever Urban Forest Plan. Disappointingly, the level of funding allocated to our forests in the FY26 Preliminary Budget makes it clear that City Hall is not meeting the moment with the urgency and investment it requires.

Despite the immeasurable benefits they provide, our forested natural areas are at an ecological tipping point. Our forests contain 5 million of our 7 million trees, capture 70% of our carbon, absorb 22% of the city's stormwater, and provide critical ecosystem services for the thousands of unique flora and fauna that, despite all odds, call NYC home. But they require more on-the-ground management to remain healthy in the long-term.

This year, the Mayor and the Council have the opportunity to be true climate leaders by investing in our urban forests in the FY26 budget. It is not a large investment to make and would result in outsized positive benefits for our urban forest and for the public. We once again urge the Council to work with us in pushing City Hall to reinvest in our natural areas and our parks. Thank you.