



**New York City Council
Oversight: FY26 Executive Budget Hearing for NYC Parks
Committee on Finance and Parks and Recreation
May 13, 2025**

Testimony By: Emily Walker, Natural Areas Conservancy, Senior Manager of External Affairs

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

We want to start by thanking the City Council for calling for a baselined restoration of funding for natural areas staff in the Formal Preliminary Budget Response. We also thank Mayor Adams for adding a \$3M one-shot allocation for natural areas into the Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) Executive Budget. This is a meaningful investment in the care of our natural areas, however we urgently ask that this funding be made permanent and baselined in order to be effective. In the FY25 budget, we lost 51 critical forest management positions, and we are concerned that a one-year restoration of funding will continue to leave us in an uncertain cycle of inadequate staffing and management in our natural areas.

In 2018, we co-created the Forest Management Framework (FMF) with our colleagues at NYC Parks. This 25-year, \$385M framework was created to provide an implementable roadmap for the city to adequately address the urgent ecological threats facing our forests. To date, only \$11.5M has been allocated to support the implementation of the plan, with inconsistent year-over-year funding, and a lack of real political ownership in the budget. Per the FMF financial model, NYC is behind. By this point in time, at least \$47.36M should have already been invested in forest management. While this might seem like a large investment, the reality is that healthy urban forests convey a far higher value to the city and its residents - our forests can prevent up to \$4.8M in annual hospital bills by cleaning our air, soak up as much stormwater as \$580M of new green infrastructure, and provide \$2.2B in recreational value for the city.

It is also important to note that in a city of 7 million trees, 5 million of them are located within our natural forested areas. The Mayor's decision to eliminate \$2.5M in funding in the FY25 budget that would have supported 51 critical forest management staff has drastically reduced the capacity of the city to meaningfully manage and address challenges in our forests, making them more susceptible to increasingly urgent concerns like the hundreds of brush fires that occurred in our parks last fall.

Last summer, the NAC conducted its first Ecological Assessment of forested natural areas in 10 years, and found troubling signs of degrading forest health and quality across the city. Our research found invasive vines present in 92% of the forest plots that our researchers surveyed, and also found that our forest midstory is showing a decline in the number of native tree species. Both of these data points indicate that forest regeneration is suffering in our natural areas. The vast presence of vines is also a reflection of insufficient staffing to care for our forests. With more permanent on-the-ground staff for forest care, NYC Parks would better be able to manage this threat to our trees.



This year we have been proud to stand beside our colleagues at the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ) and NYC Parks to support the development of the Urban Forest Plan, and view this as a critical turning point for our urban forest. The FY26 Executive Budget unfortunately fails to meet the moment of ensuring that we are not simply creating an Urban Forest Plan that will sit on a shelf. If ever there was a time for the Mayor's office to show true dedication to advancing tree equity and investing in the care of our urban forest, that time is now.

We are thankful to see funding at least partially restored in the FY26 Executive Budget, but let's end the budget dance for our natural areas and parks once and for all. We urgently ask for the \$3M allocated to natural areas to be made permanent, with 51 full-time forest management positions baselined to provide consistent, year-over-year support for our city's precious and increasingly fragile natural areas.

We have long known that our forests are at risk, and our recent data confirms that the threats are only increasing in scale and intensity. The ability to have more dedicated, full-time staff for NYC Parks to care for our forests and wetlands would allow us to better protect what we have before it disappears from us forever.

Thank you.

