



New York City Council

Oversight: Nature-Based Solutions for Climate Resiliency and Disaster Preparedness

Committee on Environmental Protection, Resiliency and Waterfronts

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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 Gennaro—and the members of the Committee on Environmental Protection, Resiliency and Waterfronts—for the opportunity to submit testimony.

We are submitting this testimony to speak about the importance of investing in the city's existing natural areas, which constitute approximately 11% of New York City's land, and one third of our parks system. The 12,000 acres of natural forests, grasslands, and wetlands within the city's park system provide a myriad of benefits to New York, but we are concerned that ongoing disinvestment in their care will result in the loss and degradation of these important resources.

Our research has found that natural forests and wetlands contain 5 million of our city's 7 million trees, capture 70% of its carbon, and absorb almost 25% of the city's stormwater. Our natural forests have also been found to be almost 13 degrees cooler than surrounding streetscapes during extreme heat events, offering respite and cooling benefits to local communities citywide.

These numerous benefits, however, require a level of care and management that cannot be sustained with current levels of City funding for our natural areas. In the FY25 Adopted Budget, the Natural Resources Group lost 51 forest management positions. These positions represented approximately 80% of the on-the-ground staff with the necessary training and knowledge to restore and manage our natural forests.

In 2024, the NAC and NYC Parks conducted the second Ecological Assessment (EA) of our forested natural areas, and found troubling signs of declining forest health in the decade since our first EA was completed. We 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.

The City is currently in the process of creating NYC's first Urban Forest Plan, required by Local Law 148. This law mandates that the City meet a 30% canopy target for the five boroughs. Simply put, the City will be unable to meet this goal if we allow our mature forests to go unmanaged due to a lack of staff. We believe that the City must step up and allocate \$2.5M in funding to restore and baseline these positions in the FY26 budget.

NYC's wetlands also provide crucial protection for coastal frontline communities, helping to absorb carbon and attenuate flood risk. In a city that has lost 99% of its historic freshwater wetlands and 90% of its salt marshes, the importance of preserving our remaining wetlands cannot be overstated. However our EA findings for NYC's salt marshes show an alarming loss of



190 acres of wetlands since 1974 . It is of vital and urgent importance that the city do more to proactively preserve and protect our existing tidal salt marshes and wetlands. More staff is needed for ongoing monitoring and management, and we also urge the city to explore new approaches to wetland mitigation with our regulatory partners at the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.

We believe that healthy natural areas are a key component to protecting the city from some of the worst impacts of climate change, but the chronic disinvestment in natural areas management shows that policy makers are not doing enough to conserve these spaces. We urge the Council to consider these crucial benefits as we approach the final stretch of budget negotiations. Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to express our support for increased investment in NYC Parks and our natural areas.

