



New York City Council

**Oversight: Ensuring the Long-Term Health and Growth of the City's Tree Stock
Committee on Parks and Recreation**

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My name is Oded Holzinger, and I am the executive director of the Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC). Thank you to Chair Hankerson and the members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation for the opportunity to provide testimony.

The NAC is the citywide conservancy that champions our 20,000 acres of forested natural areas and wetlands through targeted research, stewardship, and advocacy. We are also a proud member of the Forest for All NYC and Play Fair coalitions.

Natural areas contain 5 million of our city's 7 million trees, capture 70% of the city's carbon, and absorb almost 25% of the city's stormwater, saving the city up to \$760 million annually in water treatment costs. We've also found that our natural forests can be almost 13 degrees cooler than surrounding streetscapes during extreme heat events, offering respite and cooling benefits to neighborhoods across the five boroughs.

The NAC has also been working closely with our partners at the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ) to support the development of the forthcoming Urban Forest Plan, which will outline concrete strategies for reaching the citywide 30% canopy cover target required by Local Law 148. It's important to note that achieving this target will not be possible without active preservation and management of our forested natural areas, which again contain the majority of our city's trees.

In 2018, we co-created the Forest Management Framework (FMF) with our partners at NYC Parks. This 25-year, \$385 million framework was created to provide a roadmap for the city to address the urgent ecological threats facing our city. In the last seven fiscal years, only \$16.5 million has been allocated to support the implementation of the framework, with inconsistent year-over-year funding. This has led to the loss of staff, and delayed the necessary care and management of our forested natural areas, putting our mature trees at risk.

In 2024, the NAC and NYC Parks conducted the second Ecological Assessment (EA) of our forested natural areas, and found troubling signs of declining 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 trees. Both of these data points indicate that our tree canopy is suffering and that long-term forest regeneration is at risk. The vast presence of vines is also a consequence 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.

Caring for NYC's forests and wetlands is one of the most economically effective ways to combat extreme heat, flooding, and pollution, but for far too long, these spaces have been subject to ongoing cuts. Reliable access to high quality nature in our parks is also vital to both the public



and mental health of the over eight million New Yorkers who call this city home, providing free or very low-cost options for recreation and respite. However, the chronic disinvestment in natural areas shows that policy makers are not doing enough to conserve these spaces. We look forward to speaking in more detail about the budgetary and staffing needs to ensure that our forested natural areas receive the care they need at the Fiscal Year 2027 Preliminary Budget hearing later this month..

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today.

