NEW YORK STATE OF OPPORTUNITY | Department of Environmental Conservation

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DEC Announces Addition of 241 Acres to Catskill Forest Preserve; DEC and State Parks Launch 'Play Smart * Play Safe * Play Local' Campaign

Acquisitions Create New Recreational Opportunities, Trails to Connect Existing Public Lands, and Access to Renowned Trout Fishery

DEC and State Parks Launch 'Play Smart * Play Safe * Play Local' Campaign to Encourage New Yorkers to Recreate Responsibly during State's Ongoing Response to COVID-19

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Basil Seggos today announced the acquisition of 241 acres in the Catskills, including 208 acres adjoining existing Forest Preserve lands in the Bluestone Wild Forest that will preserve critical open space and expand recreational opportunities to support the local economy. The purchases of the two properties were made possible through a partnership with the Open Space Institute (OSI) and $758,000 from New York's Environmental Protection Fund (EPF).

"New Yorkers will have new opportunities for outdoor recreation in the Catskills thanks to these significant acquisitions, which will expand our trail network to connect the Jockey Hill and Onteora Lake properties in the Bluestone Wild Forest and protect critical habitat in the town of Warwarsing," **Commissioner Seggos said.** "We are grateful to our partners at the Open Space Institute and the Woodstock Land Conservancy, and for Governor Andrew Cuomo's continued commitment to the Environmental Protection Fund and other significant investments in forest conservation and preservation."

In addition, DEC and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (State Parks) today launched the PLAY SMART * PLAY SAFE * PLAY LOCAL Campaign to encourage all New Yorkers to recreate safely, responsibly, and locally this summer and to always treat fellow outdoor adventurers with respect. The campaign invites people to take the PLAY SMART * PLAY SAFE * PLAY LOCAL pledge, and promise to use common sense to protect themselves and others when enjoying the outdoors. During the State's ongoing response to COVID-19, New Yorkers across the state want and need to get outside for a nature break, which is good for physical and mental health. See a video message from DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos and State Parks Commissioner Erik Kulleseid.

"During the State's ongoing response to the COVID-19 public health crisis, DEC is working with our partners at State Parks to encourage all New Yorkers to PLAY SMART * PLAY SAFE * PLAY LOCAL when visiting public lands and parks. Getting outside can serve as a much-needed getaway from the stresses and fears of everyday life. So get outside, but #PlaySmartPlaySafePlayLocal, and remember to treat the outdoor adventurers you encounter with respect," **DEC Commissioner Seggos said.**

State Parks Commissioner Kulleseid said, "Governor Cuomo understands how important it has been for New Yorkers to have their State Parks open for healthy, safe recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We strongly support his call for people to show their support for our Parks and our dedicated staff by taking this pledge to

recreate responsibly this summer. These common-sense guidelines will help protect us all and help keep our parks open."

DEC and State Parks are promoting the campaign on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram by partnering with stakeholders including state and local environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, and community and public health groups. The campaign and pledge include common sense guidelines for smart and safe recreation, including incorporating social distancing and wearing a face mask, planning trips ahead, choosing a destination close to home because public restrooms and restaurants may not be open, and visiting at off hours. The agencies are also encouraging New Yorkers to take the pledge and use the hashtag #PlaySmartPlaySafePlayLocal when sharing their outdoor adventures on social media.

Take the Pledge to PLAY SMART * PLAY SAFE * PLAY LOCAL: Enjoy the Outdoors Safely and Responsibly

1. I pledge to respect the rules and do my part to keep parks, beaches, trails, boat launches, and other public spaces safe for everyone.
2. I will stay local and close to home.
3. I will maintain a safe distance from others outside of my household.
4. I will wear a mask when I cannot maintain social distancing.
5. I accept that this summer, I may have to adjust how I enjoy the outdoors to help keep myself and others healthy and safe, even if it means changing my plans to visit a public space.
6. I will be respectful of others by letting them pass by me if needed on a trail and keeping my blanket ten feet apart from others on the beach.
7. I will move quickly through shared areas like parking lots, trailheads, and scenic areas to avoid crowding.
8. If I'm not feeling well, I will stay home.

New Yorkers are strongly advised to plan their outdoor adventures ahead of time and choose alternate destinations if their first choice is closed or crowded. Check the State Parks website and 511ny website for park capacity closure alerts and visit the DECinfo locator to find the nearest DEC-managed lands. DEC and State Parks websites also feature guidelines to help New Yorkers safely engage in outdoor activities including swimming, hunting, fishing, boating, golf, and hiking. Indoor spaces and restrooms at State Parks and DEC public facilities may remain closed out of an abundance of caution to prevent community spread of COVID-19, so New Yorkers are encouraged to stay local, within their region (leaves DEC's website).

DEC acquired the former Aldulaimi property with $675,000 EPF funds from the Open Space Institute Land Trust, Inc. This acquisition will link two previously disconnected sections in the state's Bluestone Wild Forest-the Onteora Lake and Jockey Hill parcels. Prior to DEC acquiring the property, OSI and partners constructed a new connector trail suitable for use by hikers, runners, and mountain bikers. The trail improvement plan sets the stage for creating regional connectivity of protected lands and permanently protecting a scenic, forested parcel for public enjoyment and recreation.

"This project underscores the power of partnerships," **said Kim Elliman, OSI's president and CEO.** "From the time OSI originally secured this connector property, the vision was to create a new trail amenity. Being able to construct it before transferring the property to the Department of Environmental Conservation greatly accelerated the timing for the trail - which was made possible by the support and partnership of the Woodstock Land Conservancy and Fats in the Cats."

"Whether hiking, mountain biking, trail running, skiing, birding or just the quiet enjoyment of nature, the property and its new trails have become a valued resource for people in the neighborhoods and communities surrounding Bluestone," **said Maxanne Resnick, Executive Director of Woodstock Land Conservancy.** "Destination-quality trail systems are important components of sustainable, economic development and promote healthy, active lifestyles and communities. We have successfully collaborated with DEC and OSI on several area projects and are greatly appreciative of their passion for and recognition of the Catskills extraordinary beauty as well as

its importance to locals and tourists alike. In the future we envision linking these trails to the Ashokan Rail Trail, enhancing further this multi-use trail system for many."

"We applaud Governor Cuomo for his continued support of the Catskill Park, as well as the Open Space Institute that worked hard to conserve these critical lands and established a recreational trail link across the property before the sale," **said Catskill Center Executive Director Jeff Senterman.** "By adding to the public lands of the Catskill Park, we protect water quality, provide diverse habitats and provide outstanding recreational opportunities in the Catskills. Having quality, safe access to public lands is especially important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and we look forward to working with the NYSDEC to encourage all New Yorkers to PLAY SMART * PLAY SAFE * PLAY LOCAL when visiting the Catskill Park through our programs like the Catskills Visitor Center and the Catskill Stewards Program where we are able to connect with tens of thousands of visitors to the Park annually."

"This year, as New Yorkers get out to celebrate the Fourth of July in the Catskill Park, we have even more to celebrate," **said Ramsay Adams, Catskill Mountainkeeper's Executive Director.** "New York State's acquisition of land connecting Onteora Lake and Jockey Hill in the Bluestone Wild Forest will allow even more visitors and local residents to access the Park and Forest, and enhances this state treasure. Catskill Mountainkeeper is excited to Play Smart*Play Safe*Play Local at Bluestone Wild Forest and we applaud the Department of Environmental Conservation and The Open Space Institute for all of their work to add 241 beautiful and critically important acres to the Park."

Located in Ulster County in proximity to Route 28 and the New York State Thruway, the Bluestone Wild Forest is a primary gateway to the Catskill Park that conserves important natural resources and provides diverse outdoor recreational opportunities. Its lake, ponds, trails, old quarries, hemlock and oak forests on gently rolling hills-and an occasional cliff-are ideal for hiking, mountain biking, fishing, hunting, and cross-country skiing. There is developed access to Onteora Lake off State Route 28, one of the few publicly accessible lakes in the Catskills. The topography, terrain, and historic bluestone mining lend this area to more intensive recreational use, including a robust mountain biking trail system enhanced with the Aldulaimi purchase. For more information about the Bluestone Wild Forest, visit DEC's website.

In addition to the Bluestone Wild Forest acquisition, DEC recently acquired another parcel in Ulster County from the Open Space Institute using EPF resources. The former Peckham property, a 33-acre addition to the Vernooy Kill State Forest in the town of Wawarsing, was purchased for $83,000 and will provide access to the Vernooy Kill Stream, a trout stream of regional importance.

Governor Cuomo's 2020-21 enacted State Budget sustains EPF funding at $300 million, the highest level of funding in the program's 25-year history. In addition, this year's Budget added $500 million to the State's already historic $3 billion commitment to water quality improvements. The Budget also creates the Restore Mother Nature Environmental Bond Act. If approved by voters in November, the Bond Act would fund critical environmental restoration and climate mitigation projects in every corner of the state to ensure New York is able to adapt to the intensifying impacts of climate change, and reduce emissions, while creating jobs and local economic development.

View maps of the Bluestone (PDF) and Vernooy Kill (PDF) purchases.