



FOLLOWPA

FINGER LAKES - LAKE ONTARIO WATERSHED PROTECTION ALLIANCE

**New York State Senate and New York State Assembly
Environmental Conservation Committee
SFY 2015-16 Budget Hearing**

Testimony by the Finger Lakes – Lake Ontario Watershed Protection Alliance
Submitted on January 28, 2014
By Kristy LaManche, Program Coordinator

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on behalf of the Finger Lakes – Lake Ontario Watershed Protection Alliance (FOLLOWPA). FOLLOWPA is an alliance of 25 New York State counties within in the Lake Ontario drainage basin. The Alliance promotes grassroots programs to protect water resources with participation from numerous agencies and organizations, local governments and individual landowners to control nonpoint sources of pollution, eradicate invasive species, conduct watershed monitoring, and educate and engage the public. FOLLOWPA programs address identified needs as defined in county water quality strategies, comprehensive watershed management plans, state and federal plans, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation's Priority Waterbody Inventory. The Alliance facilitates the transfer of information, techniques, and resources among the 25 counties so water quality problems can be managed more effectively at the watershed level, despite crosscutting political boundaries and agency jurisdictions.

Clean, available freshwater is essential to a high quality of life. Respondents to Money Magazine's survey on the best places to live in the United States consistently rate clean water as a top consideration. The two and one-quarter million people that live and work in the Finger Lakes-Lake Ontario region of upstate New York benefit immeasurably from the 260 lakes and more than 16,200 stream miles that distinguish the landscape. These resources provide water supplies for drinking, industry, and agriculture. They support exceptional recreational opportunities and scenic vistas – enhancing the quality of life and making upstate New York more desirable to new businesses and tourists.

A study by Oxford Economics reported that New York State's tourism economy is continuing to expand and traveler spending exceeded \$57 billion dollars in 2012. Direct tourism industry employment grew by 2.8% and accounts for over 714,000 jobs in New York State. As of 2012, tourism is New York's 5th largest private sector employer. Just like New York's residents, the tourism industry relies heavily on the quantity and quality of our freshwater resources.

- Each year more than 24 million tourists visit the Finger Lakes region. Anglers participating in Lake Ontario fishing derbies bring in well over \$2 million annually to shoreline communities. In several rural areas of the region, lakefront properties make up as much as 70 percent of the local tax base. Clean lakes are major revenue generators. While the economic value of our waters is evident, their intrinsic value is not easily quantified. The satisfaction that comes with sailing on a clear lake, catching a healthy, edible rainbow trout, or viewing a bald eagle in its shoreline nest cannot be measured, but is a steady reminder of our stewardship responsibility. Our water resources are arguably one of the region's greatest assets. It is prudent to protect them, for vital communities now and in the future.

The Trust for Public Lands (2012) reported that "For every dollar spent by the State's Environmental Protection Fund to acquire or protect land, \$7 in economic benefits are returned through natural goods and services, such as filtering air and water of pollutants, and flood control." The report also noted, like the Oxford Economics Study, that activities benefitting from the EPF – including outdoor recreation, forest-related manufacturing and logging, farming, and recycling – account for more than 300,000 jobs in New York State and billions of dollars in spending."

Most recently, a survey conducted by the Global Strategy Group (November 2013) determined that a "majority of New York voters support more funding for environmental programs in New York State." Voters are in favor of increasing the annual appropriation to the EPF so that the States' sources of clean water, for both drinking and recreation, can be adequately protected. FLOWPA plays a major role in overseeing the protection and promotion of New York's water resources; therefore, an increase to the EPF and FLOWPA's appropriation would be consistent with the demands of the voters.

FLOWPA would like to thank the New York State Legislature for your foresight in enacting the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) two decades ago, and for your historical commitment to ensuring the critical programs within the EPF are funded year after year. The EPF has provided a reliable and dedicated source of funding for essential programs since 1993, supporting projects and programs to protect and improve water quality, protect air quality, conserve critical open space and farmland, and sustain important environmental education for our next generation of leaders. In addition to creating significant environmental benefits, the EPF contributes positively to New York's economy. Specifically, EPF projects and programs employ real people to do real work in NY. EPF funds provide critical financial resources for maximizing federal tax dollars and private investment as matching funds to make environmental investment dollars go even further. Since 1997, FLOWPA has been included in the EPF under the Open Space Program Category. Over 95% of our annual appropriation is distributed to our 25 member counties for program implementation.

We would like to commend the members of the New York State Legislature for working with Governor Cuomo to increase the EPF in SFY 2014-15. We would also like to extend our sincerest thanks to you for increasing FLOWPA's appropriation by \$200,000. As you know, the Governor has proposed funding the EPF at \$172 million for SFY 2015-16, but unfortunately he has proposed FLOWPA's funding remain at \$1.5 million. FLOWPA recognizes the tremendous fiscal challenges still facing New York State and the difficult decisions that must be made when financial resources are limited. However, in good times or bad, the health and well-being of the people of New York State needs to be the core objective of the budget.

On behalf of FLOWPA, I respectfully submit this testimony today and ask that you consider increasing FLOWPA's appropriation in the SFY 2015-16 budget so that (eventually) our funding will be restored to \$2.3 million. In the past four years, the integrity, value and importance of FLOWPA has truly been recognized by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC). Due to staffing limitations and the extensive process that must be undertaken to disburse money from New York State, FLOWPA has been asked to administer several federal grants from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), on behalf of the NYSDEC, so that numerous partners throughout the State could begin work on critical programs to address aquatic invasive species and habitat restoration in the Lake Ontario Basin.

Currently, FLOWPA is administering nearly \$3 million dollars in USFWS funds, on behalf of New York State, so that the threat of invasive species such as hydrilla, Asian clam, water chestnut and other nuisance species can be minimized or eliminated and fish spawning habitat and passageways can be restored. Over 50% of the grant funds have been received and FLOWPA continues to satisfy all of the progress and financial reporting requirements of the USFWS. In addition to the USFWS awards, FLOWPA is also administering several other grants on behalf of the NYSDEC, including \$775,000 for the multi-year hydrilla eradication project in Tompkins County.

FLOWPA is happy to assist the NYSDEC and New York State, but these awards DO NOT help offset the reductions in funding that FLOWPA has experienced in their EPF appropriation. It is imperative that our EPF appropriation be increased and eventually be restored to \$2.3 million, so that we can not only assist efforts underway with the above federal and state funded projects, but also develop and implement comprehensive, basin-wide programs that promote public education and citizen involvement and the sharing of information and techniques among watershed partners – FLOWPA's greatest strengths and attributes.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony and for your careful consideration of this request.