

Funding to help conserve Rensselaer Plateau included in federal budget

The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance learned today that the President's 2016 budget recommends funding an application to the United States Forest Service's Forest Legacy program that would conserve 12,348 acres of land on the Rensselaer Plateau, 14 miles east of Albany. Developed in partnership with 15 private land owners, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the Hudson River Estuary Program, the Rensselaer Land Trust, and the Agricultural Stewardship Association, the application would conserve large tracts of working forest on the Plateau through conservation easements, keeping land in private ownership on the tax rolls while limiting future development.

Jim Bonesteel, President of the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance said, "The Rensselaer Plateau's intact forests are a remarkable resource supporting sustainable forestry, abundant wildlife, watershed protection, outstanding recreation opportunities, scenic views, and more. This exciting advancement of the Rensselaer Plateau Forest Legacy initiative culminates years of effort by our partnership and will lay the foundation for conserving a continuous forest corridor linking existing protected lands with forest parcels along the 30 mile length of the Plateau. Working with private land owners to conserve these natural assets will secure an ecological and economic legacy for our community that will benefit many people for generations to come."

"The Rensselaer Plateau is one of the most beautiful places in the Capital Region, and I am delighted the Forest Legacy Program has recognized the value of conserving open spaces in this ecologically important area," said Congressman Chris Gibson (NY-19). "My staff and I are proud to partner with the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance and local stakeholders to help safeguard our rural landscape, expand opportunities for outdoor recreation, and promote responsible stewardship of our natural resources. I want to thank the RPA and their supporters for their advocacy and community spirit."

The application, which has been recommended for funding in the federal budget, requested \$5,455,000 to protect 12,348 acres of forest that link the State Capital District Wildlife Management Area, County Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center, and the RPA's recently established Rensselaer Plateau Community Forest, increasing protected land on the 118,000-acre plateau by 145%. The program requires a state match of about 25%, which will be met by the State Environmental Protection Fund. Governor Cuomo has recommended an increase of \$10 million in the Fund in his recent budget submission, to \$162 million.

The forests will be protected by the acquisition of Working Forest Conservation Easements on private forest land, on a willing landowner basis, by DEC, which has used conservation easements in the past to conserve more than 800,000 acres of private forest land statewide. The easements prohibit non-forestry development, require sustainable forestry practices, and may provide some form of public recreation access.

Forest conservation under the grant will support the Plateau's \$9 million forest economy and will enhance its \$2.8 million tourism and recreation industry. Over 95% of the forest land is managed for sustainable timber production, helping support at least 96 local logging and sawmill jobs. The grant will also enhance outdoor recreation and tourism options on the Plateau, which currently draws 300,000 visitors annually to hike, bike, fish, hunt, snowmobile, and ski, supporting 84 local jobs.

Rensselaer County Executive Kathy Jimino said, "Forest Legacy funds help all of us by paying private landowners to protect the public benefits of their forests while allowing them to do what they want with their land, including hunting, snowmobiling, and logging. This project will help keep forests working for local jobs and support landowners' rights to sell interests in their land without reducing the tax base."

Dominic Jacangelo, Town of Poestenkill Supervisor said, "Our town has a deep heritage in working forest and recognizes the timely need to protect this resource. The Rensselaer Plateau Working Forest Initiative will continue this legacy into the future and secure many jobs in the working forest sector for decades to come."

The Rensselaer Plateau has been a priority in the New York State Open Space Plan since 1992 based on large working forests, unique wetlands, forest bird diversity, and potential to connect protected lands. The proposed conservation lands include nearly 7,000 acres of forest and wetland habitat considered among the highest quality in the state, supporting at least 19 Species of Greatest Conservation Need listed in New York's Wildlife Action Plan. The forest tracts will also protect 3.5 miles of the Poestenkill, a nationally recognized trout stream and important tributary to the Hudson River Estuary.

Quote from Audubon "Audubon New York is delighted about the progress to conserve critical forest land in the Rensselaer Forest Tract Important Bird Area. Audubon recently completed an analysis of forest habitat across the Atlantic Flyway that showed that the Rensselaer Plateau is a priority forest block supporting a high diversity of forest birds of regional concern. The large, unfragmented forests that will be protected through this project are critical for the nesting success of forest-breeding birds, including ruffed grouse, wood thrush, and Canada warbler."

The US Forest Service Forest Legacy program provides funds and technical assistance to the States to conserve important forest resources. New York has used this program to conserve working forests in the Taconic Ridge, Tug Hill, Catskills and elsewhere throughout New York.

"RPA is grateful for the substantial contribution to this project of our partners, without whom this milestone would not have been possible. We look forward to a continued strong partnership with DEC, the Hudson River Estuary Program, Rensselaer Land Trust, and the Agricultural Stewardship Association as we enter the first of what we expect will be many projects to conserve the outstanding natural resources and working forest heritage of the Rensselaer Plateau."

