



*Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day in New York State  
April 22, 2020*

**Dear Governor Cuomo, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Assembly Speaker Heastie,**

We, the undersigned, are writing to recognize and honor the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, to thank you for your environmental leadership, and to urge your continued steadfast commitment to building a greener, healthier New York, as there is still so much to do. The current crisis the globe is facing underscores the importance of environmental and public health protections. As such, we urge New York's crucial environmental funding initiatives, the Restore Mother Nature Bond Act, the Environmental Protection Fund, and the Clean Water Infrastructure Act, to be maintained.

### **Our History**

When reflecting on the state of the environment in the late 1960s that prompted a movement to recognize the first Earth Day, it is impossible not to think of smog-covered major cities, rivers full of sewage and industrial waste, and catalyzing events such as the overly polluted Cuyahoga River catching on fire and reports that Lake Erie was dying. It was also a time when Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* illuminated the problems of rampant pesticide use and raised the alarm of the impacts of toxics in our environment on wildlife and our health. We started to learn more about how lead in paint and gasoline was poisoning our children. Action was needed, and numerous efforts were underway in New York and across the nation to address these environmental crises.

Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson publicized the idea of a national Earth Day. Afterward, he observed, "Earth Day worked because of the spontaneous response at the grassroots level. We had neither the time nor resources to organize 20 million demonstrators and the thousands of schools and local communities that participated. That was the remarkable thing about Earth Day. It organized itself."

Over 100,000 people participated in New York City's first Earth Day events that featured speakers including then-Mayor Lindsay, actor Paul Newman, and singer Odetta. Pete Seeger sailed the new Sloop *Clearwater* from New York to Washington DC to raise awareness. The work that led up to that first Earth Day, and the work that followed, has made a tremendous difference in the lives of all Americans, and has restored things that seemed lost.

That day, New York State established the Department of Environmental Conservation. Governor Rockefeller signed legislation creating the agency into law on April 22, 1970. Its doors opened in July.

Public demand for a cleaner, healthier environment also led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under President Nixon by the end of the year. The early 1970s saw major updates and

expansions of the Clean Air Act in 1970 and then the Clean Water Act in 1972, as well as enactment of the Consumer Product Safety Act. The Toxic Substances Control Act and Resource Conservation and Recovery Act followed in 1976 and worker health was addressed in the Occupational Safety and Health Act. These laws form the bedrock of U.S. environmental protection.

During this movement to protect our environment at a national level, New York State was right there, responding with more stringent regulatory measures for toxic waste, air emissions, and water quality standards and taking action to identify and address thousands of toxic waste dumps.

## **Our Present**

We have a lot to be proud of looking back on these past 50 years, and while the issues of today are not burning rivers and cities shrouded in smog as they once were, the work continues for New York in equally pressing and significant ways.

Last year marked one of the greatest environmental legislative sessions in a generation. Dedicated advocacy brought New York State nation-leading climate change legislation with the enactment of the landmark Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act. New York State also advanced other significant policies such as disclosing harmful chemicals in everyday products through the Child Safe Products Act, addressing the plastic pollution crisis with banning plastic bags, and protecting our drinking water sources through the phase out of PFAS chemicals in firefighting foam.

This year, under extraordinary circumstances and dire economic times, the State continued to demonstrate its environmental commitment and leadership. Specifically, we are grateful for the Governor and Legislature in advancing a \$3 billion Restoring Mother Nature Bond Act, reforming renewable energy siting to help meet our ambitious climate mandates, a ban on hydrofracking, a ban on polystyrene containers, and a continued and sustained \$300 million annual investment in programs to safeguard the health of our environment via the Environmental Protection Fund.

Despite these significant advances, our work is not done. This is especially true with what seems like daily assaults by the federal government to roll back our bedrock of environmental protections, including the most recent account of reduced enforcement of environmental laws and policy of self-reporting and regulation. Now more than ever, we need New York's leadership.

In addition, environmental injustice is as prevalent as ever. Despite comprehensive environmental protections in place, communities across our state are disproportionately harmed by past and current air, water, and land pollution, and of course from the impacts of climate change, resulting in higher rates of diseases that make people more vulnerable to the deadly symptoms of Covid-19. Blunting the worst damage from climate change requires unwavering commitment to new energy sources and drastically cutting back on our reliance on fossil fuels for any purpose, material or energy, and replacing them with safer sources. Toxic chemicals continue to be used to make the products and materials that surround us, putting extraction, production, and recycling workers, the public, and disposal communities in harm's way. Development continues to encroach on ecologically necessary land.

## **The COVID-19 Crisis Highlights Need for Environmental Protections**

We recognize the environmental commitment of policymakers reflected in the 2021 budget is significant, in light of the extraordinary challenges Covid-19 has placed on the State. This crisis changed nearly everything about daily life and the stress of the Covid-19 crisis has also highlighted our human connection to the natural world, with people finding solace and relief by the natural world, whether going for walks in parks, working in gardens, or watching bald eagle nest cams. The Governor rightly observed in one recent email update that our environment plays a significant role in our mental and physical wellbeing.

In addition, the economic slowdown and reduced transportation activities as a result of Covid-19 has shown a planetary response. Greenhouse gas emissions have dropped, “good air days” have increased in many areas, including New York City, and waterways around the globe are clearer. While not the conditions under which anyone seeks to see these changes, the situation reveals real power humans have to make change when we have the will, and illuminates how daily industrialized life, reliant on fossil fuels, impacts the globe. This is why economic recovery efforts must be focused on leaving us in a better place than where we started. Climate change and a related petrochemical economy is not going away. Climate change is costing us \$10 B right now in public health and community impacts. Funding community efforts to defend against climate change and protect public health through the EPF and an environmental bond act makes more sense now than ever.

**That is why on the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, we urge your steadfast commitment to the environment by maintaining investments that will bring economic recovery.** Specifically, we urge you to continue support for the Restore Mother Nature Bond Act and ensure it reaches the ballot this fall, and to maintain \$300 Million for projects in the Environmental Protection Fund and the new \$500 million for the Clean Water Infrastructure Act. These funds keep critical programs afloat, such as water infrastructure maintenance, open space, environmental justice work, the NYS Children’s Environmental Health Centers across the state, the Pollution Prevention Institute, and so much more. All of these efforts will be necessary to build the healthier world our children deserve.

Thank you again for your leadership and commitment to safeguarding our environment, and for all you do to protect public health in this challenging time.

Sincerely,

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