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## **DIVERSE COALITION URGES GOVERNOR CUOMO TO CONTINUE LEADERSHIP ON FOREST AND FARM LANDS AND CLIMATE CHANGE AND INCLUDE FOREST TAX LAW REFORM IN BUDGET**

*Support Comes from Republicans & Democrats, Industry,  
Environmental and Conservation Groups*

*Forest Tax Law Reform Will Position New York As National  
Leader In Addressing Climate Change, Supporting Forest-Related  
Recreation, Conserving Wildlife Habitat, and Growing our Forest-  
Based Economy*

**ALBANY, NY**– The Empire State Forest Products Association, The Nature Conservancy and a bi-partisan group of state lawmakers as well as over 20 industry and conservation groups, today called on Governor Andrew Cuomo to fulfill his promise to reform the Forest Tax Abatement Program in the 2018 State Budget.

In an effort to protect the 75 percent of New York's forests that are privately held, the 480 Tax Law offers private landowners tax deductions and benefits in exchange for sustainably managing the forests on their property. However, because the existing law is overly complex, few eligible landowners have applied for the benefits and the loss of our forests has continued. Known as the 480-a Timber Tax Law, this longstanding property tax abatement program is in need of reform to protect New York's forests from development and encourage sustainable forest management on private lands while also dramatically reducing the barriers to participation for private landowners. Reforming the law this year would provide an opportunity to modernize the program to ensure landowners receive incentives for the additional public benefits provided by their forests, including wildlife habitat and climate change mitigation through carbon sequestration.

Reform would also include relief for local governments that, in some cases, are currently forced to shift the tax burdens of privately-held forest lands to other local taxpayers. The Governor's proposed reforms are a win for private forest landowners; a win for our forest based economy; and, a win for wildlife, carbon and water quality.

During his 2017 State of the State address, Governor Cuomo himself called for reform, describing the current law as "overly complex" and preventing the vast majority of eligible landowners from participating, continuing decades-long conversion of forest land to non-forest uses and weakening New York's defenses against climate change.

“As the federal government fails to take the lead in enacting proactive policies to combat climate change, we have a moral obligation to do what we can at the state and local level,” said **Jessica Ottney Mahar, Policy Director of The Nature Conservancy in New York**. “This measure is a forward-looking way for New York to do its part and have our forest landowners mitigate climate change by sequestering carbon and putting their land to work, to the benefit of both themselves and their communities.”

“The 19 million acres of New York’s forests support a robust forest industry in upstate New York and provide a wealth of social and environmental benefits to our communities, from timber production to outdoor recreation and tourism,” said **Senator Betty Little (R-Queensbury)**. “Over the years we have created tremendous initiatives to support the conservation of publicly-owned forests in New York, and the time is ripe for us to address the private forest lands that make up 75 percent of the forest lands in the state.”

Little noted the forest management and timber industries alone contribute \$20+ billion to New York’s economy annually – more than 90 percent from privately-owned forest lands.

The bipartisan effort to protect New York’s forests and their contributions to natural defenses against climate change has drawn together uncommon allies, including national, regional, state-wide, and local organizations within the business, farm, environmental, energy, and land conservation communities. These organizations and allies support the reform and expansion of the 480-a Tax Law, inviting more New Yorkers to take advantage of the tax benefits of environmentally-responsible forest management.

The Forest Tax Abatement Program reforms would encourage sustainable forest management on privately owned lands to the benefit of New York’s people, economy, environment, communities, and climate. Under the existing laws, just 16 percent of eligible forest lands have been enrolled for property tax benefits.

“The current program overburdens property owners with cumbersome regulations and excessively complex requirements for participation, and has led to just seven percent of eligible landowners applying for the available tax benefits,” said **John Bartow, Executive Director of Empire State Forest Products Association**. “By reforming the program to be open to more landowners, and reducing the administrative burden for entry, more forest landowners will be encouraged to enroll in the program and will be able to manage their lands to their families’ – and New York’s – benefit.”

“By reforming the current tax abatement program to reduce the acreage threshold from 50 to 25 acres of land, as well as allowing half of the parcel to be open space, we will open up the program for landowners in more rural parts of the state,” said **Jeff Williams, Director of Public Policy for the New York Farm Bureau**. “This law will not only economically benefit the Upstate economy by boosting forest-related tourism, it will branch out across the state to benefit agriculture as well, as farmers who own forest land become eligible to participate.”

“New York State’s millions of acres of forests help communities in Upstate New York by providing a wide range of economic and recreational benefits to residents, families and visitors,” said **Senator Joseph Griffo (R-Rome)**. “While we have worked to support the conservation of the state’s publically-owned forests, it is important that we also address the private forest lands that make up the majority of the state’s forest lands.”

“The forest-based economy across Upstate New York is a critical source of local jobs, local conservation efforts, local tax relief, and numerous other locally based benefits,” said **Senator Tom O'Mara, Chair of the Senate Environmental Conservation Committee (R-Big Flats)**. “I’m hopeful that Governor Cuomo will recognize the value of our proposal and make this timely and important investment in the future of our forestlands.”

“The proper management of New York State forest lands ensures a sustainable future for our multi-billion dollar forestry industry, while also providing environmental, recreational and other quality of life benefits to our communities. It’s an important aspect of New York State’s entire agricultural industry,” said **Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Senator Patty Ritchie (R-Heuvelton)**. “This reform will encourage proper management of our forest lands and allow more landowners, including many of our hardworking farmers, to take advantage of the benefits provided for being good stewards of their land.”

“Meeting the state’s climate change goals requires a multi-faceted approach and improving incentives for sustainable forestry and climate-smart agricultural practices will have a significant impact on curbing carbon emissions,” **Assemblymember Didi Barrett (D-Hudson)**. “I fully support the proposed budget tax reforms that will help keep forestlands from development and encourage more participants in the program. Forestry reforms as well as agricultural practices like carbon farming that sequester carbon in the soil and improve atmospheric conditions at the same time are just the sort of policies that will strengthen New York’s role as a climate-smart leader.”

“Our forests are among the most beautiful and valuable natural resources in New York State,” said **Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo (D-Endwell)**. “Reforming this program will encourage sustainable forestry practices. It will also open up more land for conservation, allowing residents and visitors to enjoy the beauty and benefits of New York’s forests. Funding these reforms should be a priority in our upcoming budget negotiations.”

“I think it's important to pass measures that support our forests,” said **Assemblywoman Addie A.E. Jenne (D-Theresa)**. “Many families own forest land, and this bill will help them hold on to that property and pass it down to the next generation. Forests are important to our economy and recreation, and this bill encourages management and creates a long- term plan for survival. Healthy forests support our biomass industry, which is a job generator in the North Country. With the hit forest owners are going to take on the federal tax plan, this is the year to tackle this issue.”

“The Empire Forest for the Future Initiative (EFFI) puts New York at the forefront of environmental conservation and sustainable economic growth,” said **Assemblymember Pamela J. Hunter (D-Syracuse)**. “EFFI’s aims to expand private forest land stewardship and make more forest lands eligible for tax abatement are both ecologically and economically beneficial, strengthening the forest industry while helping preserve vital natural resources. I urge the governor to include funding for EFFI in the 2018-19 state budget.”

“The forest industry continues to be a prime contributor to the New York State economy,” said **Assemblyman D. Billy Jones (D-Chateaugay)**. “Here in Upstate New York, we are home to thousands of acres of forest and farmland that is privately owned. Due to the restrictions and challenges the current forest tax law presents, most forest land owners cannot access the property tax benefits the state has to offer. Reforming this outdated law to allow more landowners to reap these benefits will help improve tourism, our environment and bolster economic development throughout the North Country.”

“New York’s forest lands provide significant economic, environmental and societal benefits to the people of New York. Reforming the 480-a Timber Tax law by reducing the barriers to participation will have the added benefit of increasing the amount of managed private forest lands,” said **Darren Suarez, Director of Government Affairs for The Business Council of New York State, Inc.** “More than 60,000 New Yorkers are employed in forest products manufacturing. Combined, they receive over \$2.5 billion in annual wages. The future of those jobs is connected to the continued maintenance and viability of our forest lands. Reforming the Timber Tax will ensure this vital industry is allowed to grow.”

“Private forests support the vast majority of New York’s birds and other wildlife, for the benefit and enjoyment of millions of New Yorkers,” said **Michael Burger, Director of Conservation and Science for Audubon New York**. “Through Governor Cuomo’s leadership, forest tax law reform will enable more private forest owners to conserve their lands as well as to make them healthier and more diverse through proper management.”

“The biggest threat to private forests in New York and across the country is conversion to non-forest uses,” said **Dave Tenny, President and CEO of the National Alliance of Forest Owners**. “Good tax policy helps families and businesses afford to invest in their trees and keep their forests economically viable. The result is an abundance of healthy forests that provide economic, environmental, and social benefits for generations of New Yorkers.”

“New York’s family woodland owners are the cornerstone of keeping our forests as forests – and working to clean our air, filter our water, provide habitat and support good paying rural jobs” said **Tom Martin, President and CEO of the American Forest Foundation**. “These families and individuals face annual expenses to combat invasive bugs and diseases and lower fire risk, pay insurance and other costs, yet they receive only occasional income from the sale of timber and typically nothing for the environmental services they provide. We are excited by the innovative and forward-looking approach that New York is considering to help these woodland owners be great stewards of their land.”

"Forests pull carbon dioxide out of the air and store it in plants and soils, while also providing recreation and wildlife habitat and protecting water quality," said **Peter Lehner, Senior Attorney with Earthjustice**, the nation's largest nonprofit environmental law organization. "The Governor can become a national leader on the next front in curbing climate change by helping all landowners use their lands as climate stewards. Enacting Timber Tax law reform promptly will give financial support to those who manage their forests to enhance carbon storage and watershed protection. This will be a milestone in climate change policy."

"Strengthening private forest ownership builds strong communities, supports smart timber practices, promotes recreational opportunities and protects natural resources and habitats. These common-sense property tax reforms will dramatically increase the spread of private land conservation and quality forest management, while reducing the burden of abatement programs on local government," said **Kim Elliman, President and CEO of the Open Space Institute**. "We applaud the sponsors and support enactment of this bipartisan measure."

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