



NEW YORK CITY AUDUBON

Testimony of New York City Audubon
City Council of the City of New York
Tuesday, May 15, 2005

RE: Int. No. 626 – In relation to protecting the purity of the New York City drinking water supply and the security of its water supply infrastructure.

My name is Yigal Gelb and I am Program Director for New York City Audubon. New York City Audubon was established as a permanent chapter of the National Audubon Society in 1980. We serve and represent 10,000 members in the City's five boroughs. Our primary mission is to protect wild birds and habitat within the City, improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers. Our areas of concern have long included the Catskill and Adirondack Parks and, most particularly, the watersheds of New York City's Water Supply System.

I am pleased to testify today in support of Intro. 626 – the New York City Water Supply Protection Act. On behalf of New York City Audubon, I thank Speaker Gifford Miller, Chairman James Gennaro, Council staff members that worked on this bill, and all the Councilmembers who have co-sponsored this very important legislation.

From our earliest days, New York City Audubon has been a staunch advocate of the City's Water Supply System lands and facilities in the Catskill, Delaware, and Croton systems. In the 1980s we intervened in opposition related to the proposed Prattsville Pumped Storage Power Project, which would have fouled the waters of the City's Schoharie and Ashokan Reservoirs and the world-famed Esopus Creek trout fishery. In the 1990s, we advocated for the City's Watershed Protection Program, which has earned the City a filtration avoidance waiver and has saved the City's water and sewer rate payers billions of dollars in filtration costs. Most recently, New York City Audubon filed extensive comments with the New York State Environmental Conservation Department in opposition to a proposed development, known as the Belleayre Mountain Resort. This mammoth, grandiose scheme threatens water quality in the City's Ashokan and Pepacton Reservoirs, making it difficult for the United States Environmental Protection Agency to continue granting a filtration avoidance waiver to the Catskill and Delaware Systems. It would also intrude on and fragment the Ashokan Important Bird Area.

Perhaps the most important feature of the Watershed Protection Program is its willing-seller, willing-buyer land acquisition and conservation easement initiative. By acquiring lands that are close to streams, wetlands, reservoirs, and other water bodies, as well as those on steep slopes and easily eroded surfaces, the program serves a vital function for water quality protection. With some 60,000 acres protected under the program, staff members at the City's Department of Environmental Protection have done an outstanding job of acquiring land and conservation easements during the first seven-and-a-half years of the program. The current land acquisition program will end soon, having protected approximately 75,000 acres through purchase or easement by 2007.

While protecting 75,000 acres by 2007 is entirely laudable, it is not enough to ensure continued protection of water quality in the Catskill/Delaware system. Once sparsely populated, the watershed is experiencing a boom in real estate development. Second home construction and ownership are at an all time high, and increasing numbers of metropolitan area residents are moving permanently to homes in the watershed. The threat to water quality in trout streams and reservoirs posed by these continuing incursions on watershed lands is palpable and imminent.

It goes without saying that failure to protect the watershed through further land acquisition will cost the City and its water and sewer rate payers billions of dollars in capital costs for a filtration system as well as hundreds of millions annually in operation and maintenance costs. On that score alone, New York City Audubon fully supports the land acquisition initiatives as described in the legislation before us today.

There is another very important reason to protect more land in the Watershed. This month Audubon New York, the state office of National Audubon, published the second edition of **Important Bird Areas of New York: Habitats Worth Protecting**. It lists 136 Important Bird Areas around the state, 28 of which have also been declared as Bird Conservation Areas by State Government. Those that are wholly or partially within the Catskill/Delaware watershed are 70,000 acres in the Ashokan Reservoir Area, 310,000 acres in the Catskill Peaks Area, 5,000 acres in the Pepacton Reservoir Area, and 65,000 acres in the Cannonsville Reservoir/Steam Mill Area. Combined these sites support significant populations of 10 so-called "species at risk." Species at risk include those birds that are listed by Federal or New York State agencies as endangered, threatened, or of special concern, as well as those on Audubon's Watch List of 2002. The sites may provide critical habitat for breeding, wintering or migrating populations. The ten species are American Black Duck, American Woodcock, Bald Eagle, Bicknells Thrush, Canada Warbler, Common Loon, Coopers Hawk, Northern Goshawk, and Red-shouldered Hawk. Additionally, the sites support 14 "Responsibility Species Assemblages," that is, sites responsible for providing important habitat for substantial numbers of individual bird species that cannot survive in other types of habitat. Such sites are usually large, intact areas. The Responsibility Species are Baltimore Oriole, Black-and-white Warbler, Black-billed Cuckoo, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Cerulean Warbler, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Least Flycatcher, Louisiana Waterthrush, Northern Flicker, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Yellow-throated Vireo. Fragmentation of habitat is the single-most dangerous threat to the survival of all the above listed species.

Extending the City's land acquisition program for another ten years with a goal of protecting another 75,000 acres, as called for in this legislation, would achieve the following goals: It would help prevent habitat fragmentation, assuring the survival of many bird species and other wildlife. It would protect water quality in the trout streams and reservoirs of the watershed. It would be a huge benefit for the nine million people who rely on the City's excellent water. And it would be a boon to all New Yorkers who enjoy fishing, hunting, hiking, birdwatching, and other outdoor activities on City-owned and State-owned lands in the watershed.

For all the above reasons New York City Audubon heartily supports the measures called for in Intro. No. 626