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NEWS

For Release: Immediate
Thursday, Sept. 16, 2004

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FOREST RANGERS PREVENTED FROM DOING THEIR JOB

Based upon a recent letter of “No Confidence” filed by New York’s Forest Rangers and complaints by the public, the Conservation Alliance of New York (CANY) is again calling for a review of the Department of Environmental Conservation’s (DEC) organization, administration and spending of dedicated monies from the “Conservation Fund”. A similar request was made in June 2004 due to similar concerns involving the Environmental Conservation Officers (ECOs). Following that request there was a change at the top of the law enforcement program which houses both the Forest Rangers and the ECOs. However, there was no external review of the agency.

However, continuing complaints from across the State about the lack of the public’s ability to contact an Environmental Conservation Officer or Forest Ranger when they need one and the lack of officers’ ability to respond prompted CANY to look more closely at what is behind these complaints. As a result, CANY is recommending that the Washington, DC based “Wildlife Management Institute” (WMI) be asked by the State to conduct a full review of the DEC’s natural resources programs, including the ECO and Forest Ranger programs. WMI has conducted over 50 similar reviews for 40 states, three Federal and two provincial agencies over the past 50 years and is nationally recognized for their expertise in this area. This is the second time this request has been made. CANY again hopes that the DEC will recognize its obligation to protect the citizens and natural resources of New York and honor this request.

The ability to measure erosion in the forest rangers’ ability to protect and steward the State’s forests may take years to accomplish. The adverse ecological changes to the forests often come slowly, but are difficult to reverse. However, the impacts from the reduction in their ability to protect the public may already be measurable. **According to an internal poll of the forest rangers, 99% are of the opinion that the directive prohibiting Forest Rangers from self-dispatching to emergencies will result in delays leading to serious injury or death of a citizen or a forest ranger.**

The issue of self-dispatching has become a labor issue when it should be a public safety issue. Since April of 2003, rangers are required to get approval from a supervisor before responding to an emergency. That approval may be difficult to obtain because it may not be possible to make immediate contact with a supervisor. While waiting for that approval, a person’s life may be hanging in the balance. Contrast this approach to one taken by a ranger from Region 5 in 1996. After searching for an elderly woman who had been missing in the mountains for days, a ranger completed his “shift” and went home to rest. After a brief nap, he couldn’t stand

the thought of her being alone in the woods for another night knowing it could be her last. He went back into the mountains that same night and, a few hours later, emerged with the woman – ALIVE. For his heroic efforts, he received a “Commissioner’s Award” and joined with those who make up the legend for which the rangers are so proud. **Cost was not the issue – the woman’s safety and well-being were the issues and her family is glad they were.** The notion that search and rescue operations are costly and thus should not be a priority of the DEC Forest Rangers, whether real or imagined, is one that the citizens of the State, whether or not they enjoy the out-of-doors, should not tolerate.

This recognized lack of a ranger’s ability to respond in a timely manner is not imagined, it is real. For example, if a woman knocked on a ranger’s door and told him that her daughter had just fallen through the ice, the ranger would not be able to assist her with the her drowning daughter until he made as many phone calls as it took to reach a supervisor. In 40 degree water a person has about four minutes before succumbing to hypothermia.

Another issue that affects the Forest Rangers’ ability to protect and serve the public is their schedule. It has been changed to include their days off and the 8-hour shifts that are dictated to them. They now have only **1 day a week when everyone is working; before they had three.** That one day is usually taken up with administrative meetings. This change has greatly affected their ability to do localized training for both fire, and search and rescue. If you don’t work with ropes every once in awhile you will not be nearly as efficient and accurate when it really counts. You don’t want someone’s life hanging on a “Z” rig that you are not sure is set up right. It’s a skill that can save lives, and it requires repetition.

They are assigned in advance which eight hours in a day they can work. Unfortunately it is not always possible to accurately predict the weather in advance and the hours they are assigned may not fit the duties they will be asked to perform by the public. We are all for accountability and clearly understand that the Forest Rangers must be accountable. However, you can have accountability with flexibility. Ranger work is dictated by a variety of issues; weather, season, actions they may witness that day, or by a phone call they got for a member of the public that night. Without having some flexibility in their day, the public suffers, management suffers, and the Rangers suffer. The Forest Ranger knows his geographic area, and it not the same anywhere. The central office may be trying to put a square peg in a round hole. Consider this scenario: it’s Sunday morning, the leaves are changing color, and the weather is real nice this weekend. The Forest Ranger knows lots of people are out camping and if he wants to make sure things are cleaned up before people leave then he should be out there by 7 a.m. Instead management has him/her set at 10AM through 6PM for the entire month. All that’s left is a pile of garbage and no clue whom it belongs to. Does that benefit anyone? It certainly won’t help the hikers that don’t show up at dark!

The potential for loss of timber resources or life is further increased by the current policy of not allowing some rangers to park their trucks at home. Rather they must park them at a DEC facility. Their trucks are their tools. They are equipped with radios and the equipment needed to carry out their work. Having to drive miles from home to get a truck before you can respond to the emergency adds to the response time and seconds can be critical to responding in time. If the issue is one of trust, the DEC could equip the vehicles with a global positioning system like the ones used in local police departments and by interstate truckers. That would allow constant monitoring of a vehicle’s location and might actually improve safety.

According to the Department of Environmental Conservation’s website, “Forest Rangers are a dedicated, vital force employed by the DEC and stationed throughout New York State. Each ranger has a geographic territory where that ranger is responsible for the preservation, protection, enhancement of the State’s forest resources, and the safety and well being of the public using these resources.” **It seems inconsistent with the Governor’s goal of putting one-million new acres under public “ownership” for use by the public that, at the same time, the forest rangers would be put in a position of being less able to protect both the land and the public.**