



RIVERKEEPER
NY's clean water advocate

**walkill river
watershed alliance**

March 22, 2017

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

The Honorable Carl E. Heastie
Speaker of the NYS Assembly
NYS State Legislative Office Building 932
Albany, NY 12248

The Honorable John J. Flanagan
Temporary President and Majority Leader of the NYS Senate
NYS State Capitol Building, Room 330
Albany, NY 12247

RE: Wallkill River Enhanced Monitoring Study

Dear Governor Cuomo, Speaker Heastie and President Flanagan,

Thank you for your commitment to water quality represented by your FY 2017-2018 New York State budget proposals. The potentially historic levels of funding being considered are a testament to your leadership on this important issue.

We write today to request that the commitment to water quality include \$800,000 in funding for a two-year Department of Environmental Conservation "Enhanced Monitoring Study" of the Wallkill River. The study requires \$300,000 in its first year and \$500,000 in its second.

At nearly 100 miles long, the Wallkill flows through Orange and Ulster counties, and its watershed encompasses dozens of New York State municipalities. It joins the Rondout Creek and forms the largest tributary to the tidal Hudson River, which reaches the Hudson just upstream of drinking water intakes that serve over 100,000 people in seven municipalities.

In 2016, at least 30 miles of the Wallkill suffered from a “Harmful Algal Bloom” that lasted for more than 60 days, and the algae also affected a portion of the Rondout Creek downstream of the Wallkill’s confluence. The river turned bright green and toxic, cutting off recreation in a region that benefits greatly from outdoor tourism. (See photo attached.) At least one small business, New Paltz Kayaking Tours, had to suspend operations from a public park in New Paltz. Central Hudson closed its recreational beach on Sturgeon Pool, on the advice of the NYS Department of Health. The NYS DEC posted signs at multiple boat launches and fishing access points, warning the public of the risk of contacting the water. Farmers and their customers expressed concerns about the potential risks of using Wallkill River water for irrigation. Veterinarians educated their customers about the risks posed to dogs by swimming in the river. Numerous television, radio and print media outlets documented the algal bloom and its impacts, and more than 60 people attended an educational forum on the issue. While many lakes and ponds have been affected by Harmful Algal Blooms, the DEC has documented no other river in New York State affected to such a great extent nor for such a long duration as the Wallkill was in 2016.

This is at least the second time a Harmful Algal Bloom has been documented on the Wallkill River, and evidence from Central Hudson’s beach monitoring records and other anecdotal evidence suggests the river has been affected at several times in the past, if never to the extent it was in 2016. This episode comes on top of data gathered by community scientists partnered with Riverkeeper that has documented levels of sewage or other fecal contamination in the Wallkill far in exceedance of federal safe-swimming criteria.

The DEC’s Enhanced Monitoring Study represents the state acting fast and being aggressively responsive to an emerging problem that has rightly raised public concerns. Ulster County, the Towns of New Paltz, Gardiner and Goshen, and the Village of New Paltz, have all requested that the state fund the Enhanced Monitoring Study. Senator William J. Larkin, Jr., Senator John J. Bonacic, and Assemblyman Kevin Cahill each support the study. Both Riverkeeper, a 50-year-old organization devoted to protecting the Hudson and its tributaries, with more than 50,000 members and constituents, and the Wallkill River Watershed Alliance, which has hundreds of members and constituents, support the study.

The two-year Enhanced Monitoring Study would be conducted by DEC and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). The state’s commitment would be \$300,000 in the first year for gathering data, and \$500,000 in the second year for modeling. The federal commitment by the USGS would total approximately \$400,000, including for several new stream gages. While we are confident that the USGS commitment can be fulfilled at present, we are worried that future federal budgets may compromise its ability to partner with the state if the study is not initiated soon.

This study will help to provide a roadmap for most efficiently reducing pollution, so that federal, state, local and private resources may be applied most efficiently to restore the river's water quality. A similar study on the Mohawk River, ongoing, has helped prioritize investments there, resulting in water infrastructure projects that will significantly improve water quality.

Thank you again for your commitment to clean water. Please help us by including the Wallkill River Enhanced Monitoring Study in the 2017-2018 NYS Budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan Shapley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dan Shapley
Water Quality Program Director
Riverkeeper

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason West". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jason West
Executive Director
Wallkill River Watershed Alliance



The Wallkill River in August 2016, at the Gardens for Nutrition in the Village of New Paltz, where people use the river water to irrigate community gardens. (Photo by Emily Vail / NYS DEC Hudson River Estuary Program).