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Land Acquisition Progress Report Issued by DEP

Commissioner Christopher O. Ward of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) announced today that the Department has issued a Progress Report on the activities of the Watershed Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program (LASP) over a five-year period from January 1997 to January 2002. The LASP was established in 1997 by the Watershed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA); the Filtration Avoidance Determination (FAD) issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); and the Water Supply Permit (WSP) issued by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). The program is designed to protect water quality through the purchase of sensitive, vacant lands in the watersheds of the City's reservoirs in eight upstate counties. While there is no target number of acres to acquire, the City has committed \$250 million for acquisition of lands in the Catskill and Delaware System watersheds and \$11.5 million for properties in the Croton System basins.

The report delineates the progress DEP's Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program has made during the first half of its 10-year program. As of January 21, 2002, the City had solicited the owners of 258,719 acres, out of a 10-year target of 355,050 acres, thereby exceeding the requirements of the MOA and FAD.

"The response of landowners was, and continues to be, excellent," said Commissioner Ward. "With 477 purchase contracts signed, at a cost of over \$94 million, 34,447 hydrologically sensitive acres have been dedicated permanently to the protection of water quality in the watershed's streams and reservoirs. This program's achievements are comparable to the combined work of the top ten land trusts in the Northeast. We are particularly pleased with our acquisitions in high-priority areas of two critically important basins -- the Rondout Reservoir, west of the Hudson River, and the West Branch and Boyds Corner Reservoirs, east of the Hudson. Some 9,270 acres -- almost 50% -- of vacant lands available in the West Branch/Boyds Corner basin had been acquired by January 21st, and more acreage is under negotiation. Over 32% of eligible lands in the Priority 1A category of the Rondout Basin had been secured."

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Some other highlights of the report:

- ▶ Conservation easements are another means of protecting sensitive lands from development that might be harmful to water quality. Under this program the City buys development rights and pays a portion of property taxes in perpetuity, and the easement allows for continued ownership and passive use. By January 2002, the City had secured easements on 2374 acres, and was negotiating for the acquisition of several dozen more easements.
- ▶ Agricultural easements totaling 2,276 acres had been secured in partnership with the Watershed Agricultural Council.
- ▶ Croton System acquisitions totaling 451 acres had been secured by the City, while New York State had also secured several hundred acres, all in the basin of the New Croton Reservoir.
- ▶ Flood buyout – In January 1996, severe flooding damaged homes built on flood plains in Delaware County. Working with local, State and federal agencies, LASP developed and implemented a program to purchase 28 of the flooded parcels at pre-flood values from willing sellers. Those properties will remain undeveloped and protective of water quality.
- ▶ Public access to certain newly acquired properties for specific recreational uses was envisioned under the MOA. By mid-2001, LASP had opened 5,200 acres for hunting, hiking and fishing and an additional 1,800 acres exclusively for hiking and fishing. (In 2002, these figures increased to 23,000 acres open for hunting and 10,000 for hiking and fishing.)

"The City's comprehensive watershed protection program is conducted in partnership with watershed communities, the EPA, the State and the City," said Commissioner Ward. "This cooperative arrangement has established a model that is recognized nationally and internationally. The Land Acquisition and Stewardship program, a major component of that effort, provides benefits not only to over nine million consumers of City water, but also to watershed residents and visitors with recreational activities on City-owned lands and waters and protection of the region's environmental assets, including the water quality of world-famous trout streams."

All properties acquired must meet certain criteria, which ensure that hydrologically sensitive lands will not be paved over, bulldozed, built on, or otherwise damaged. Thus, the threat of urban sprawl is diminished, wetlands and stream banks are protected, steep slopes remain vegetated and avoid erosion, and buffer zones around reservoirs are increased. While DEP manages lands for source water protection as its primary goal and function, it also works to ensure the health of forests and other environmental assets.

The Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program acquires land or conservation easements at fair market value from willing sellers only, and pays property taxes in proportion to the property rights acquired. For more information, owners of land in the watershed may contact the Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program at (800) 575-LAND. For more information on the City's watershed protection programs, visit nyc.gov/dep.