

Plan expands use of forest

Snowmobiles OK along trail in newly acquired state land
By Brian Nearing
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Albany

Snowmobiles would be allowed in a new state plan unveiled Friday for about 40,000 acres of newly acquired Adirondack forest once owned by a major timber company.

The Adirondack Park Agency's proposal for how people will be able to use former Finch-Prun timberlands in Essex and Hamilton counties drew a mixed reaction from environmental groups and a generally positive review from an advocate for more motorized access to state land in the Adirondacks.

"I think that local governments will generally be pleased with it," said Fred Monroe, director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board. "The most important thing to the five towns there is the winter economy. And the snowmobile connector trail in the plan is critical to the winter economy."

The plan calls for a north-south snowmobile trail that would split the Finch lands roughly between the Essex Chain of Lakes and the western side of the Hudson River. Monroe said the connector would open up snowmobile access to Minerva.

The newly purchased state land includes the Essex Chain of nearly a dozen ponds and lakes near Newcomb, as well as the area surrounding OK Slip Falls, a remote 250-foot waterfall that few have seen since it has been surrounded by private property. Sections of forest along the Hudson and Indian rivers also are part of the mix.

Two environmental groups, the Adirondack Council and the Adirondack Mountain Club, offered support to the plan because it will bar motorized uses, like snowmobiles, motor vehicles and float planes, from about 33,000 acres, including the Essex Chain itself and the Hudson Gorge.

"This classification proposal provides for a motor-free paddling and canoe camping experience, providing a beautiful alternative to the St. Regis Canoe Area. This is good for everyone," said Adirondack Mountain Club Executive Director Neil Woodworth.

Both Woodworth and Council Executive Director William Janeway said the plan was "not ideal" but balanced "competing interests" because the snowmobile trail that would divide the Essex Chain and Hudson Gorge. Both groups had called for both of those areas to be joined together as motor-free.

Another environmental group, Protect the Adirondacks, said the state plan was "driven by motor vehicles uses," according to its director, Peter Bauer. While praising the motor-free portions of the plan, he said the balance was a "checkerboard ... the state missed a chance to create a motorless Essex Chain."

But Bauer said the portion of the plan that would designate about 60 miles of the upper Hudson Gorge as wilderness, which bars all motorized use, was an "historic accomplishment."

Janeway said, "It is important to note that the route that the APA apparently envisions for a new snowmobile trail was selected based on conservation science. The route largely follows existing gravel roads. It traverses upland, hardwood forests rather than wetlands. It is well away from the Essex Lakes and most of the route is a mile or so from the Hudson River."

He added, "While this recommendation does not have everything we had hoped for, it is most of what we asked for. The Adirondack Council and the Adirondack Mountain Club will not allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good."

The proposal will be presented during APA meeting in Ray Brook on Wednesday through Friday. A decision on whether to accept the recommendation rests ultimately with the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

On the Essex Chain and Hudson Gorge, automobile access would be allowed up to the edges of the new motor-free areas, but not inside. The plan also includes a single road from the north into a lake in the Essex Chain, only for those with a handicapped-access permit.

Float planes will be allowed on First Lake and Pine Lake, via a previous agreement between the towns and the Nature Conservancy. Planes would not be allowed on Third Lake, something that Monroe said was disappointing to sportsmen.

bnearing@timesunion.com • 518-454-5094 • @Bnearing10