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Comment deadline approaching on Whiteface training

By LOU REUTER, Enterprise Staff Writer

WILMINGTON - The public comment period runs through Thursday on a proposal for the Army to use sites on Whiteface Mountain to conduct high-altitude helicopter training in April and May.

The 10th Mountain Division's combat aviation brigade, based at Fort Drum, has developed the training in preparation for deployment in Afghanistan later this year. The missions are planned for three specific sites on Whiteface Mountain, where takeoffs and landings will be practiced. Two sections of the Whiteface Veterans Memorial Highway and the summit of the mountain are the only areas where the helicopters will touch down.

The training period has been scheduled for a time of year that studies - including one by the state Department of Environmental Conservation - deemed will have the least amount of impact to the mountain's natural environment.

Copies of an Environmental Assessment and Draft Finding of No Significant Impact, a 19-page document prepared by the Fort Drum Public Works Environmental Division that describes the training, are available for public viewing at both the Lake Placid Public Library and the E.M. Cooper Memorial Library in Wilmington.

The Army is looking to conduct the training through the middle of May, with a maximum of 22 missions per week.

Four different helicopters are called for in the missions, which are scheduled to be conducted only in daylight hours Monday through Thursday. The aircraft included in the maneuvers will be the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, the UH-60 Blackhawk, the CH-47 Chinook and the OH-58D Kiowa Warrior.

The training plan was presented at a Feb. 8 meeting at the Adirondack Park Agency's headquarters in Ray Brook. The Governor's Ad Hoc Committee for Low Level Flights took part in the meeting, as did Whiteface Mountain Ski Center Manager Bruce McCulley, representatives from the DEC and John Sheehan of the Adirondack Council. A March 19 Associated Press report said the helicopter training plan received input and support from the Adirondack Council and other groups.

DEC rangers and biologists have investigated possible negative environmental impacts to wildlife and vegetation in the areas around the three sites, and spokesperson Maureen Wren said the training plan has the agency's approval.

Cait Schadock, the National Environmental Policy Act program manager at Fort Drum, put together and hand-delivered the document currently on file at the two libraries. She said that after

the comment period ends, the next step would be "processing" any comments received and then posting them online. She wouldn't comment on what would happen after comments were posted.