

Adirondack Almanack  
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BLOG ENTRY

## Adirondack Council Sues Over Snowmobile Plan

The Adirondack Council has announced that it has filed a lawsuit in the New York State Supreme Court in Albany against the Adirondack Park Agency (APA), the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) over their plan to site snowmobile trails in wild areas. Last fall the Adirondack Council asked the APA to reject DEC's proposed snowmobile trail plan saying that it was an attempt to keep wide snowmobile trails deep inside the Forest Preserve rather than move them toward the edge of public lands, closer to existing travel corridors.

In 2006 DEC and OPRHP developed and later approved a conceptual snowmobile plan for the Adirondack Park, a supplement to the State of New York Snowmobile Trail Plan (the statewide plan). In November 2009 the DEC and the APA developed what's called Management Guidance: Snowmobile Trail Siting, Construction and Maintenance on Forest Preserve Lands in the Adirondack Park, to begin implementation of the 2006 Snowmobile Plan in the Adirondack Park. The Adirondack Council has argued that this guidance establishes snowmobile trail management practices that do not conform to the guidelines and criteria of the Adirondack State Land Master Plan (SLMP).

“DEC should not be allowed to carry out these changes until the SLMP has been amended,” Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal said in November. “In 2004, DEC acknowledged that amending the SLMP might be necessary to carry out its plan. Then in 2006, DEC had a change of heart and said it would not be needed.” Houseal and the Council argue that the DEC had also made a number of significant changes that contradict the 2006 plan that will lead to significant environmental degradation.

Among these changes was eliminating the co-siting of Community Connector trails. The original plan had called for connector trails to be constructed within 500 feet of existing roads; the new plan allows these trails to be as far as two miles from current roadways. Because so much of the Adirondack Forest Preserve is within two miles of a road, the two mile limit means the potential for widespread construction of new trails in wild areas. The Council says that they have presented the court with a map showing the impact of the plan (above), which shows the dramatic impact of allowing construction of nine to twelve-foot snowmobile trails on so much wild Adirondack lands. Other changes include additional allowances for rock and stump removal, more frequent use of motorized maintenance vehicles, and more tree-cutting off the trail itself.

The Council's lawsuit alleges that the state agencies did not follow the proper procedures for changing the snowmobile trails plan. It accuses the agencies of approving a management plan that violates existing state laws and rules and seeks to halt implementation of the plan until these issues are resolved.

“This new, state snowmobile trail management plan will allow the widening of foot trails by up to 50 percent to accommodate snowmobiles. It authorizes the illegal use of tracked grooming vehicles. It allows the construction of new trails almost anywhere on public Wild Forest lands,” Houseal said. “None of these changes can be made without amending the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which these agencies didn’t bother to do. ”

One of the issues at stake is safety according to the Council. The New York State Office of Parks and Recreation reports that there were 323 snowmobile accidents (14 fatal) across the state in the 2008-2009 season. Unsafe speed was the primary cause of 86% of those accidents according to officials who said alcohol was a factor in 24 of the 83 snowmobile-related fatal accidents that have occurred over the last five years. “The whole idea was to move the hamlet-to-hamlet traffic away from remote interior trails so the people using them would be safer,” Houseal said of the original 2006 trail plan. “Trails that take people miles into the woods and across lakes are inherently unsafe. Getting emergency vehicles to the injured after an accident would be much easier if trails were nearer to public highways too.”

There are nearly 140,000 snowmobiles registered in New York State. The NYS Office of State Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation oversees the 10,500 miles of state-designated snowmobile trails (about 1,000 miles of that on Forest Preserve land in the Adirondacks and Catskills). State trails are open from the close of big game hunting season (December 7, 2009 in the Northern Zone and December 23, 2009 in the Southern Zone) until March 31.

Public snowmobiling is also allowed on 600,000 acres of private Adirondack lands, managed under conservation easements that allow public access to roads and trails. Snowmobiles are allowed on all private lands – more than three million acres – where riders have permission from the landowner.

Posted by John Warren