

Daily Gazette
January 13, 2010

Adirondack Council sues over trail rules

By Kathy Bowen, Gazette Reporter

ALBANY — The Adirondack Council has filed a lawsuit against three state agencies over changes to the management of snowmobile trails in the Adirondack Forest Preserve.

But the director of another environmental group, the Adirondack Mountain Club, said he's waiting to see if the new guidelines will correct snowmobile intrusion in the interior of the Forest Preserve.

The lawsuit, filed in state Supreme Court in Albany, names the Adirondack Park Agency, the state Department of Environmental Conservation and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, for what the Adirondack Council said are policies in conflict with the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

The APA voted 10-1 in November in favor of the changes in snowmobile trail guidelines and will allow the widening of trails by mechanical groomers to 9 feet on straight stretches and 12 feet in curves on what are being called community connectors along the state lands. Other trails will remain 8 feet wide.

It also states new trails should be on the periphery of the forest preserve which it defines as up to two miles away from a roadway or the boundary of the Forest Preserve.

Brian L. Houseal, executive director of The Adirondack Council, said the definition is so broad it is meaningless.

“Nearly all wild forest is within two miles of a road,” he said. “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.”

APA spokesman Keith McKeever said the agency had not received the details of the lawsuit as of this afternoon, but had been advised of its contents.

“It's very disappointing,” he said. “We spent a lot of time and good effort working with various stakeholders to product a guidance document with a balanced approach.”

Adirondack Mountain Club Executive Director Neil Woodworth said his group does not feel this is the time to litigate the issue.

“We prefer to take a wait-and-see approach at this point,” Woodworth said. “There may come a time in the future if too many trees are cut down or a particular project violates the constitution

or the state master plan, that we might want to bring a case.”

He said the ADK did file a lawsuit three years ago in opposition to a plan to increase snowmobile trails and the use of tracked groomers deep in the Jessup River Wild Forest Unit Management Plan. The new guidelines appear to settle the matter to environmentalists' liking.

“It's interesting that the APA on Thursday will look at an amendment to the Jessup River Forest Trail and that amendment addresses the reasons we sued,” Woodworth said. “They are now looking to close the interior trails to snowmobiles and leave them open to cross country skiing and snowshoeing while creating one community connector trail near the road.”

He said the mountain club will look at all proposed changes to trails in the park to make sure they follow the new guidelines.

“We are watching and there's no reason to assume at this point that the DEC, APA, snowmobile clubs and localities won't follow the guidelines,” he said.

Houseal said the Adirondack Council is not convinced the guidelines will protect the interior lands of the preserve.

“Since 2002, the Adirondack Council has participated in good faith in a planning process that would create community-connector snowmobile trails, which we agree are important to the winter economy of our local communities,” he said. “Wintertime protection of the interior of the Forest Preserve is vital for hibernating wildlife. It is also vital to protect the solitude that remote areas of the Park provide to the on-snowmobiling public.”

DEC spokeswoman Lori Severino said her agency had no comment on the lawsuit. In November she said the guidelines proposed by her agency and revised by APA staff are believed to be in compliance with the master plan.

Houseal disagrees.

“Our petition will prove that the snowmobile trail plan approved by the Adirondack Park Agency on Nov. 13, at the request of the DEC, violates the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which these agencies are supposed to enforce and administer,” Houseal said.