

ADIRONDACK COUNCIL SUES THREE STATE AGENCIES OVER ILLEGAL SNOWMOBILE TRAIL DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR PARK
Newly Approved State Plan Violates, Contradicts Existing Laws, Endangers Riders and Emergency-Response Personnel

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ALBANY, N.Y. – The Adirondack Park’s largest environmental organization today filed a lawsuit against three state agencies over a snowmobile trail plan that the organization says will damage the “forever wild” character of the Adirondack Forest Preserve and will endanger riders.

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

The Article 78 petition was filed today in State Supreme Court in Albany, against the state’s Adirondack Park Agency (APA), Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

“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,” said Brian L. Houseal, Executive Director of the Adirondack Council. “None of these changes can be made without amending the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which these agencies didn’t bother to do.

“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,” Houseal said. “That process called for the removal of existing snowmobile trails from the interior of Wild Forests and placement of wider, safer community connector routes on the periphery of public lands, adjacent to roads,” said Houseal.

“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. “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.”

Houseal said the new state plan was an illicit attempt by snowmobile enthusiasts to keep existing trails deep inside the Forest Preserve rather than moving them closer to the edge of public lands, where they will cause fewer environmental impacts. 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 non-snowmobiling public, he said.

“We recognize the collaborative efforts of the technical teams from the Park Agency and DEC in developing the new Management Guidance: Snowmobile Trail Siting, Construction and Maintenance on Forest Preserve Lands in the Adirondack Park,” Houseal said. “But this action violates the intent of the State Land Master Plan and the environmental impact studies completed on the earlier state proposals.

“We have presented the court with a map showing the impact of the plan, which would allow the construction of snowmobile trails virtually anywhere on Wild Forest lands, up to 12 feet wide on curves,” Houseal said. “Current law requires that trails be no wider than eight feet and requires that they retain the character of a foot trail. It requires new trails, especially those connecting communities, to be adjacent to current roads and at the edges, or periphery, of large areas of Forest Preserve.

“The plan actually says that new trails should be on the periphery of the Forest Preserve. But then the plan defines ‘periphery’ as up to two miles away from a roadway or the boundary of the Forest Preserve,” Houseal explained. “That definition is so broad as to make it meaningless. Nearly all Wild Forest is within two miles of a road. This clearly contradicts the common use of the word ‘periphery’ in every English dictionary in the world.

“Our petition will prove that the snowmobile trail plan approved by the Adirondack Park Agency on November 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. He added the plan also violates the State Environmental Quality Review Act, by contradicting the terms and findings of the only environmental impact statement prepared in advance of the new rule changes.

Created in 1892, the Adirondack Park is six million acres in size. About half is public land, known as the Forest Preserve. Of that public land, less than half (1.1 million acres) is managed as Wilderness, where no motorized travel is allowed.

More than half of the Adirondack Park’s public land (1.6 million acres) is managed as Wild Forest, where snowmobile riders are allowed to use state-designated foot trails only. (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.)

The Adirondack Council is a privately funded, not-for-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the natural character and ecological integrity of New York’s 9,300-square-mile Adirondack Park. The Adirondack Council has members in all 50 United States and on four continents.