

Adirondack Park has mixed year

By Felicia Krieg

The Adirondack Council's 26th annual State of the Park report released last Tuesday praises President Barack Obama's passage of the Cross-State Pollution Rule that is expected to significantly reduce acid rainfall in the Northeast by 2014.

But the annual report also spotlights the staff and budget cuts that have strained the Adirondack Park Agency and the Department of Environmental Conservation and those agencies' ability to handle routine permits and enforcement of state laws.

According to the Adirondack Council, Obama's Cross-State Pollution Rule will have the most positive impact on the Adirondack Park of any government action this year. The new regulation will "require deep cuts in sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions from every power plant from Texas to the New York-Pennsylvania border," said John F. Sheehan, director of communications for the Adirondack Council.

The emissions reductions are in effect right now and acid rainfall should be lessened significantly by 2014. "That's a very quick schedule," Sheehan said.

"It was announced that these cuts would be necessary back in 2004 during the Bush administration. It took a while for the various law suits that were filed to be sorted out. At the moment we're confident that it (the rule) will survive a couple of current legal challenges," Sheehan said.

The report lists various measures in government over the past year with a positive or negative designation for each as to their effect on the park.

Issues are divided into nine categories; the governor, state Legislature, courts, local governments, Adirondack Park Agency, Department of Environmental Conservation, other agencies, federal government and attorney general.

About 80 government-related actions are examined in the report. The report also includes a profile of the Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program as the 2011 Award Winner for Conversationalist of the Year and a "Tip of the Hat" section acknowledging the positive efforts of nonprofit groups and individuals to protect the Adirondack Park and sustain the economy in areas relating to the park.

An especially important measure that has negatively affected the park is budget cuts to the APA, which have resulted in cuts to the agency's workforce.

"In the past three years, they have gone from having 70 employees to 52. Obviously, that's a third of their workforce having been removed from the agency. That has already resulted in the Park Agency changing the way it deals with enforcement cases and it is causing the agency to give up on enforcement of older cases because they don't have the personnel anymore," Sheehan said.

For example, violations of the APA subdivision law that occurred before 2000, Sheehan said, simply can't be regulated anymore because of staff shortages.

Another problem is that the APA currently does not have a chair and four citizen commissioners are serving beyond their expired terms, Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian L. Houseal said. "This is happening as the APA finishes the complex permit review for the largest development ever proposed in the Park, the 750-unit Adirondack Club & Resort proposed for Tupper Lake," Houseal said.

The APA has 11 board members total. Eight are appointed by the governor and the other three are designees of the Secretary of State, Commissioner of Environmental Conservation and the Commissioner of Economic Development. So far, Gov. Andrew Cuomo has not appointed anyone to the eight positions at the APA waiting to be filled. "We're still waiting for the governor ... We're not sure what's going to happen," Sheehan said. "These folks are still being asked to make decisions about development permits that are proposed," Sheehan said. "So there's a great deal of uncertainty in the direction that agency will take."

Lack of personnel has led the state to completely cut certain programs like the educational visitor's centers. The only two visitor's centers in the Adirondacks were closed in 2010 due to lack of personnel, Sheehan said.

"A couple of colleges, Syracuse University and Paul Smith's College, took over for the state but, frankly it's embarrassing that the state of New York does not operate a visitor's center for the largest park in the contiguous United States," Sheehan said.

The visitor's centers are important, according to Sheehan, because education is a "vital" part of maintaining the "integrity" of the Adirondack Park.

As far as positive measures go, the report notes that the state Legislature and Cuomo passed a law last session that will require businesses that take more than 100,000 gallons of water per day from state water sources to first obtain a permit from the Department of Environmental Conservation.

The law does not apply to farms. Environmental Conservation Committee Chairmen Sen. Mark Grisanti, R-Buffalo and Assemblyman Robert Sweeney, D-Lindenhurt, sponsored the bill, which was signed by Cuomo in August. "There's a lot of pressure ... (from inside and outside the

Adirondacks) to control this water supply," Sheehan said. There are a half dozen businesses "essentially sticking a straw into the Adirondacks right now."