

North Countryman
Monday, October 3, 2011

Border security act trumps environment

By George Earl

A controversial bill that would grant Homeland Security broad powers over federal lands within 100 miles of an international border has caused a backlash among a variety of groups in Border States.

The bill would give homeland security immediate access to any public land managed by the federal government in order to conduct activities that assist in securing the border, including access to maintain and construct roads, construct a fence, use patrol vehicles, and set up monitoring equipment.

It would waive certain laws regarding sections of the international border between the United States and Mexico and between the United States and Canada.

John Sheehan is the spokesman of the Adirondack Council. He said if the bill were approved it would lift environmental protections on a vast area of public land along the Canadian border.

“The Canadian border has literally 1,000 miles of the border that is within a national park or the part of the rocky mountain range that would have a great deal of public land in it and where fences and that sort of thing would not be terribly appropriate.”

"More news, photos about Denny Rehberg" Denny Rehberg is one of 49 Republican co-sponsors of the measure. He said in a statement that the bill would provide border patrol with the same access on federal land that it currently has on state and private land. He insists that there is nothing about the bill that creates any new authority to intrude into the lives of Americans.

Critics say the bill amounts to a federal land grab and that it would grant the federal government overreaching powers.

National environmental groups like the Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society oppose the bill. They say border security and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive.

Environmentalists in the Adirondacks agree. Again Sheehan.

"Concentrating all that power in the hands of Homeland Security is bad public policy," said Adirondack Council Spokesman John Sheehan. "Just in general it's bad government."

Sheehan said that while sizeable chunk of the Adirondack Park is within 100 miles of the Canadian border, very little of it is federal land.

One hundred miles is probably the northern two thirds of the park,” Sheehan said. “There aren’t a whole lot of federal lands in the Adirondack Park, but they do exist in other places along the Canadian border.”

So for the time being it does not appear that the exigencies of border security will change the backcountry very much, at least in the Adirondacks.