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Irene: Adirondack Mountain roads, hiking trails damaged

Hikers, tourists warned of slides; repair rules eased

By Stephen Williams

ADIRONDACKS — Going into the Labor Day weekend, tourists and recreational users of the Adirondacks should be prepared for the damage Hurricane Irene has caused, state officials said Wednesday.

The Department of Environmental Conservation renewed an advisory first issued last weekend, telling hikers and campers that hazardous conditions continue in the hiking trails on mountains and in the back-country.

“In the interest of public safety, we have closed several back-country trail areas in the Catskills and eastern Adirondacks due to extensive damage and hazardous conditions,” DEC Commissioner Joe Martens said in a statement.

The storm caused widespread damage in Essex County, which is among the areas covered by President Obama’s disaster declaration.

The Eastern High Peaks, Giant and Dix wilderness areas are all closed to hikers and campers through Labor Day and beyond, Martens said.

In the High Peaks region, Mt. Colden, Trap Dike, Wright Peak, Skylight, Basin, Armstrong, Lower and Upper Wolf Jaws, Dix, Macomb, Giant and Cascade mountains all sustained new landslides, and DEC officials said there’s a threat of more slides.

Flooding, foot-bridge washouts, trail washouts and blown-down trees are likely to be encountered in other parts of the Forest Preserve, Martens said.

“Be prepared to turn back when conditions warrant,” Martens advised hikers.

Seven DEC-operated campgrounds will be closed through this weekend, but Martens said many other campgrounds that will be open may have experienced storm damage.

At Lake George, boaters are being advised to be careful when they go out on the water. The Lake George Park Commission issued a boating advisory due to high water conditions and floating debris.

“Boaters should be cautious due to the extraordinary number and size of floating hazards. Crews have found and retrieved trees, docks and even a timber bulkhead from the lake,” said Bruce E. Young, chairman of the park commission.

In the eastern Adirondacks and especially in Essex County, road closures are still widespread, and communities like Keene are badly damaged.

On Tuesday, touring the Keene area, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo suspended Adirondack Park Agency and DEC permit requirements for reconstruction in Adirondack communities and emergency projects.

“Government needs to do all it can to help devastated communities and homeowners get back on their feet and sometimes that means getting out of the way and allowing for quick rebuilding and restoration,” Cuomo said.

Keene, at the foot of the High Peaks, was cut off from the Northway after Route 73 and Route 9N were both closed due to bad erosion damage. The community also saw its fire station destroyed when a small creek behind the station turned into a raging torrent.

Cuomo said much of the replacement and repair work will take place in environmentally sensitive areas, so routine permits — like DEC stream disturbance permits — will be suspended to speed the work.

A spokesman said the Adirondack Council, an environmental advocacy group, said the council recognizes people need to make quick repairs, but it is concerned about the suspension of the permitting process.

“We’re a little nervous about it, frankly. We’re not sure how long it’s going to last or what it’s going to cover,” said council spokesman John Sheehan.

Through the governor’s office, APA Executive Director Terry Martino issued a statement supporting the permit suspensions.

“We want to make clear that the APA is not applying its permitting jurisdiction to any emergency project necessary in response to Hurricane Irene for the protection of life or property,” she said.