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Snowmobilers pleased but environmentalists worried by court's decision to allow more trails through Adirondack Park

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SARATOGA SPRINGS — Snowmobilers are applauding a court decision permitting new trails that would connect Adirondack communities while eliminating other periphery routes.

In 2006, the state released a Snowmobile Plan for the Adirondack Park that also included new standards for developing and maintaining trails on state land.

Environmentalists objected, saying new trails would threaten sensitive wildlife habitat toward the interior of the park and alter the woodlands' character.

But the Appellate Division of State Supreme Court has upheld the state plan, possibly paving the way for new trail work to begin.

“That’s very, very good,” said Bob Ryan, president of the Saratoga County Association of Snowmobile Clubs. “This will help the economy in the Adirondacks a lot. It will get more people out. They’ll be able to go from town to town and spend more money.”

One proposed route would go from Blue Mountain Lake to Indian Lake.

The Adirondack Council, which challenged the state plan, is considering whether to appeal.

In 2009, the council supported a new state Department of Environmental Conservation policy on the relocation of snowmobile trails. The objectives were to move traffic out of the Forest Preserve interior, closer to highways, and off frozen lakes and rivers where many fatal accidents occur.

The Adirondack Council says the 2006 plan, which the court upheld, doesn’t share those objectives.

“It allows for the siting of new trails as far as two miles from road corridors and from the edge of the Forest Preserve, rather than the 500-foot standard the state uses everywhere else,” Executive Director Brian Houseal said in a statement. “New trails could go absolutely anywhere. That is the opposite of what the state told the public it would do.”

Council spokesman John Sheehan said, “We’re in a position where we’re trying to figure out where to get a handle on the inconsistent policy we believe the state is taking. The final impact of what they say they’re going to do on paper is very bad for the Forest Preserve.”

The Adirondack Park snowmobile trail system encompasses more than 1,800 miles on both public and private land. The state plan limits the total number of miles in the park, so as new connector trails are built, others would have to be abandoned.

“We may have to give up some trails to make other ones better,” Ryan said.

The Adirondack Forest Preserve has about 2.7 million acres. Roughly 1 million acres are classified as wilderness, where snowmobiles are not permitted. The remaining 1.7 million acres is wild forest land, where snowmobiles are allowed.

In its ruling on Thursday, the court noted that new or reconfigured trails require approval in designated, individual unit management plans, which involves further environmental review. However, the council says it now has the burden of challenging such plans on a unit by unit basis.

“There are dozens of individual management plans in the Adirondack Park,” Houseal said. “We are right back where we started, wondering how we can help the public stop the DEC from building trails in inappropriate locations.”

DEC spokesman David Winchell said, “The ruling by the Appellate Division affirms the DEC’s authority to adopt and implement snowmobile guidance for trails in the Adirondack Forest Preserve. DEC, with extensive public input, developed the Snowmobile Plan for the Adirondack Park to protect the natural resources of the Adirondack Forest Preserve while providing a safer riding experience for the public. The court’s validation of the snowmobile guidance allows DEC to complete critical Adirondack Forest Preserve Unit Management Plans that have been on hold pending this decision. DEC will immediately begin working with the Adirondack Park Agency to move these management plans forward.”