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Adirondack Wild Rivers area proposed

By Paul Post

SARATOGA SPRINGS — An Adirondack environmental group is calling for creation of a new Wild Rivers Wilderness Area when the state completes its purchase of 69,000 acres of former Finch Paper Co. property.

The plan includes a major expansion of the existing High Peaks Wilderness.

The 72,000-acre Wild Rivers area would encompass the Essex Chain of Lakes, Hudson River Gorge, Blue Ledges and OK Slip Falls and would be combined with existing sections of the Blue Mountain Lake and Vanderwacker Mountain wild forests and all of the existing Hudson Gorge Primitive Area.

“This land has been off-limits to the public since before the Civil War,” Adirondack Council Acting Executive Director Diane W. Fish said. “It is located within a day’s drive of more than 70 million Americans and Canadians. It contains no homes and no communities. The roads on these parcels will revert to foot trails quite easily. We urge the state to protect these soon-to-be-acquired lands, lakes and rivers to safeguard wildlife habitat and water quality and from overuse and motorized traffic.”

The area would include 48 miles of wild rivers, plus nine interconnected lakes and ponds.

The proposed High Peaks Wilderness expansion would include the Boreas Ponds section of the Finch purchase, along with existing state lands that aren’t currently managed as wilderness.

The group’s recommendations are included in a letter from Fish to state Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joseph Martens.

Some Finch lands were in Saratoga County, where the council is proposing an expansion of the existing Lake Desolation Wild Forest east of Great Sacandaga Lake, by adding the Thousand Acre Swamp off Fox Hill Road in Edinburg. In Benson, Hamilton County, the council wants to see the Shaker Mountain Wild Forest expanded by more than 2,000 acres.

Both parcels are slated for state snowmobile trails on existing logging roads.

The Adirondack Park is a 9,300-square-mile — 6 million acres — preserve of public and private lands. Public lands make up about half of the park (2.7 million acres). Timberlands, private homes and 130 small communities make up the other half. Public and private lands are intermixed.

All state lands in the Adirondack Park are protected by a section of the state Constitution known as the Forever Wild Clause, which bans their lease, sale or development, as well as logging or destruction of public forests. These lands are known as forest preserve.

Not all public forest preserve is wilderness. Less than half of the forest preserve — about one million acres — is managed as wilderness, where no motorized or mechanized travel is allowed. These one million acres represent about 90 percent of all wilderness areas remaining in the Northeast.

Recently, a group called Protect the Adirondacks called for creation of a new Wild Rivers Wilderness Area, too. But its proposal is much smaller in scope — 38,000 acres — and does not include the sections of Vanderwacker and Blue Mountain wild forests or an expanded High Peaks Wilderness Area.

A copy of Fish's letter to the DEC and detailed maps of the areas described may be viewed at www.adirondackcouncil.org