

# Adirondack Daily Enterprise

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### Wilderness? Wild forest? Canoe area?

Sportsmen, environmentalists, local officials debate extent of public access to the Essex Chain of Lakes

By CHRIS KNIGHT - Senior Staff Writer ([cknight@adirondackdailyenterprise.com](mailto:cknight@adirondackdailyenterprise.com))

Environmentalists, sportsmen and local elected officials are debating how much public access should be allowed on the 18,294-acre Essex Chain of Lakes tract in the central Adirondacks once it's acquired by the state and added to the Forest Preserve.

The Essex Chain tract will be the first phase in the state's five-year, \$48 million plan to buy 69,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberlands from The Nature Conservancy - a deal announced in August by Gov. Andrew Cuomo. The acquisition of the Essex Chain parcel is expected to close before the end of the year, or sometime early next year.

Once that happens, it will be up to the state Adirondack Park Agency to classify the parcel, based on recommendations from the state Department of Environmental Conservation and input from the public. The agency's decision will determine the extent of public recreational access to the property.

The Park's green groups want the tract designated as wilderness, which would prohibit motorized use and is the most restrictive stand land classification. But there are different opinions in the environmental community about how big the wilderness should be, and what kinds of access should be allowed to it.

Meanwhile, sportsmen's groups and some local officials want to see more opportunities for recreational access to the Essex Chain than a wilderness designation would allow. Some hope the land is classified as wild forest, which would allow for limited motorized access on the tract.

Located in the towns of Minerva and Newcomb in southwestern Essex County, the Essex Chain of Lakes parcel includes thousands of acres of forest, a dozen interconnected lakes and ponds, 14 miles of Hudson River shoreline and 8 miles of Cedar River shoreline. But it's not untouched by the hand of man. Finch has logged parts of the property over the years, and the tract has an extensive network of dirt roads. It's also home to many hunting camps and cabins built by a pair of sportsmen's clubs whose leases to large portions of the property will eventually come to an end through the deal.

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Wilderness proposals

The first proposal for a wilderness area that would include the Essex Chain was drafted more than 20 years ago by the Adirondack Council, and the group still supports the plan, according to spokesman John Sheehan.

The 72,480-acre Wild Rivers Wilderness would "incorporate five of the wildest and best preserved sections of major rivers in New York state that are not only biologically very rich but also pretty sensitive in terms of being damaged by overuse pretty easily," Sheehan said. "They do have a great deal of potential for public recreation, if we're careful about where the roads go."

Hiking, cross-country skiing, fishing and paddling would be some of the recreational opportunities available in the Wild Rivers Wilderness. The Council's plan would close most of the property's interior dirt roads, limiting access to its periphery. Sheehan admits that would make it difficult to get a canoe or kayak in to the lakes of the Essex Chain, although he says it wouldn't be impossible.

"For the same reason you wouldn't put a tourist road to the bottom of the Grand Canyon so people could drive there, you wouldn't want to put a road into the Hudson Gorge or into the Essex Chain of Lakes," Sheehan said. "It would be a mistake long term and ultimately degrade the resource. We're very much in favor of finding ways for people that can't walk long distances to get into places like this, but it's going to take more creativity than simply allowing a road to remain open."

Sheehan did say the council is open to a discussion about creating opportunities for all-terrain-vehicle access for the disabled at the edges of the tract.

Another environmental group, Protect the Adirondacks, announced last month its proposal for a smaller, 39,000-acre Upper Hudson River Wilderness Area that would include the Essex Chain tract. Protect's plan would provide more opportunities for public access than what the council has proposed.

"There's a real exciting opportunity to protect three different river systems in a wilderness area as well as dozens of lakes and ponds, while not really diminishing the historic use," said Protect Executive Director Peter Bauer. "There has been floatplane use along the periphery; we're open to seeing that remain. There certainly has been road access throughout the property, and we're looking at providing some limited but important road access at the south end and the north end for the sportsmen community as well as to access the Essex Chain of Lakes, and to access the take-out point for the Hudson River coming down from Newcomb."

Like Protect, the Adirondack Mountain Club is OK with some limited road access to the interior of the Essex Chain tract. ADK Executive Director Neil Woodworth said his group wants to see the property classified as either wilderness or a canoe area.

"Obviously there's going to have to be a road corridor that comes down to one of the more northerly of the lakes to provide public access, much as we provide public access to Lake Lila," Woodworth said. "And then we would shut down the rest of the road network, except for a road

that would go down to the Hudson River to provide a reasonable one-day take out for people that are canoeing down the river."

The Park has only one designated canoe area, the 19,000-acre St. Regis Canoe Area near Paul Smiths, which, like a wilderness, is closed to motorized access. Woodworth said the Essex Chain of Lakes could provide the same kind of paddling and primitive camping experience, but on a smaller scale.

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More access

The idea of limiting access to the periphery of the Essex Chain tract has some sportsmen and local elected officials concerned.

"From the sporting community perspective, we aren't supportive of wilderness classification," said Walt Paul, an access and land use specialist with the nonprofit New York State Conservation Council. "The reason for that is it restricts the access to large numbers of the public, especially to the sporting community. The number one reason people are leaving the sports of hunting, fishing and trapping across the nation is access to land. We're much more in favor of wild forest classification."

Fishing, hunting, mountain biking and paddling opportunities abound on the Essex Chain tract, but without road access, those opportunities won't be there and the local economies won't benefit, Paul said. He said the plan DEC crafted for the Moose River Plains Wild Forest would be a good fit for the Essex Chain tract.

"That has a little something for everybody," he said. "There are many miles of road open. There's roadside camping. There are campsites positioned along certain waterways. There's also a mountain biking route planned in there. And there was another section in there with a section split off for wilderness. We like that model as a starting point."

If there isn't sufficient access to the Essex Chain tract, it will be "severely underutilized," which will run against what state officials have said are their broader goals with the Finch, Pruyn acquisition, said Jason Kemper, chairman of the Conservation Fund Advisory Board.

"This is being proposed or talked about as a large economic boon to the North Country," Kemper said. "That economic boon is going to be directly related to how easy the general public will be able to access these parcels, for the sporting and non-sporting community."

"I'm not saying you have to open up every road, campsite and everything, but you've got to provide key access points. It's got to be a balance of providing access yet protecting some of those resources that make this property unique."

Newcomb Supervisor George Canon said the loss of the hunting and fishing cabins on the property, including those belonging to the Gooley Club, which Canon is a member of, will hurt

the economy of his town. That's why he's hoping the plan DEC crafts will provide as much access to the tract as possible.

"I'm in my 70s," Canon said. "I'm not going to be able to walk in there if they close that gate. Unless I have some way to drive to one of the ponds, I'm not going to be able to do that, and that's probably true of a large percentage of the population."

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### DEC's plan

DEC spokeswoman Emily DeSantis said the department is working with the APA on a classification plan for the former Finch lands, and has been including stakeholders in those discussions, but she didn't reveal what the state's plan for the Essex Chain tract would be.

However, based on public statements by DEC officials and what the stakeholders involved are hearing from DEC, the state appears to be seeking some kind of middle ground.

"It could be a combination of wilderness and wild forest," DEC Division of Lands and Forests Director Rob Davies told the Enterprise in August during a tour of former Finch lands near Indian Lake.

Paul Hai, who lives in Newcomb, is on the town planning board and works as program coordinator for the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry's Northern Forest Institute. He said DEC officials came to the town and talked about making the deal benefit both the environment and the local economy.

"Right now the preliminary conversation DEC has shared is that ideally they'd like to see a wilderness corridor along the Hudson and a wild forest designation for the rest of it," Hai said. "I'd be very excited about that. Then we're talking about mountain biking, greater access for disabled individuals, greater snowmobile access. Those are things that absolutely increase the opportunities for individuals to experience this place, and the opportunities for economic development in Newcomb."

Canon said he's been told by DEC that its plan would provide road access to one of the interior ponds but not the whole Essex Chain.

"I think there will be some (canoe) carries involved, but I think there are plans to get vehicle access all the way to one of the ponds, and I think there's plans afoot to maintain float plane service into First Lake and Pine Lake," Canon said. "They are pluses as far as I'm concerned."

Sheehan said he's heard the same thing, although he called it discouraging.

"We're not particularly thrilled to hear that DEC is going to allow floatplane access to First and Pine lakes," he said. "They also seem more intent on allowing roads to remain open than we had hoped. We'll have to persuade them and the governor that our approach is correct."

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### Closing the deal

In September, the state Comptroller's Office approved the state's \$48.6 million contract to buy the former Finch lands from The Nature Conservancy. Just over \$12 million has been spent on the contract to date, according to information on state's Open Book New York website, although it's unclear if that's the state's payment for the Essex Chain tract or what that amount covers.

Both DeSantis and Nature Conservancy spokeswoman Connie Prickett said the deal for the Essex Chain hasn't closed yet and no money has been paid to the conservancy.

"We've not received a check yet," Prickett said. "We think it will be done by year end. We'll know more in the coming weeks."

DeSantis said DEC hopes to close on the Essex Chain parcel this winter or next spring.

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### Next debate

The debate over public access to the Essex Chain tract is likely to repeat itself when the state moves forward with acquiring the subsequent phases of land in the Finch deal. There's already controversy brewing over whether the state should close the seven-and-a-half mile road into the Boreas Ponds tract, a 22,000 acre parcel bordering the High Peaks and Dix Mountain wilderness areas, when it acquires the property and adds it to the Forest Preserve.

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Contact Chris Knight at 891-2600 ext. 24 or [cknight@adirondackdailyenterprise.com](mailto:cknight@adirondackdailyenterprise.com).

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