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DEC looks to streamline frustrating management process

by Chris Knight

Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced earlier this year that the state will buy 69,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberlands in the Adirondack Park over the next five years. As part of the process, the state Department of Environmental Conservation will be tasked with creating a management plan for each of those units.

A unit management plan, or UMP, will need to be in place before any new recreational amenities, like hiking or snowmobile trails, or campsites and lean-tos, can be created.

But the DEC has struggled to finish management plans for all the state land it already owns, with some plans taking decades to complete.

That has frustrated those who see the plans as necessary for improving recreation and increasing tourism in their communities, and one DEC official says the state is now taking a different look at how to plan for managing the Forest Preserve.

In March 2002, the DEC launched its unit management planning process for the Saranac Lakes Wild Forest. It's a 79,000-acre swath of state land that wraps around some of the most populated communities in the Adirondack Park: Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake.

A decade later, however, the plan remains incomplete. Many people who have an interest in the wild forest are upset that it's taken so long.

"It's frustrating", said Jack Drury, a Saranac Lake resident who used to teach wilderness recreation management at North Country Community College.

"It's long overdue. In terms of the potential that I think exists for this area, we're not being able to maximize that potential because we don't have a unit management plan."

Drury isn't alone in his frustration.

At meetings earlier this month, the village of Saranac Lake and town of Harrietstown boards approved resolutions pushing for DEC to finish the UMP, and to include new mountain biking trails in the wild forest.

In a statement, DEC officials blamed the delay in completing the Saranac Lakes plan on the complexity of the wild forest, which includes four campgrounds, many miles of hiking trails and publicly owned shoreline, boat launches, snowmobile trails and fishing access sites. The agency also named issues it's been working to resolve, like motorized access, campsites along shorelines, and access for hunting and fishing.

DEC's lack of success in drafting the Saranac Lakes plan is not exactly a surprise.

The department is still trying to complete management plans for all the state land it owns in the Adirondack Park, more than 30 years after the process started.

Gov. George Pataki recognized the challenge as far back as 1999, when he set a five-year deadline for completing UMPs for all Forest Preserve lands in the Adirondacks and the Catskills, a deadline that still hasn't been met.

"It's three governors later, and that's still a concern for everybody involved," said John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council, an environmental group. He said staffing cuts are a big reason why DEC's UMP effort has languished.

"Given the strain on DEC's personnel right now, they're not in a position to do this any faster. They've lost 20 percent of their staff since 2008."

Rob Davies, DEC's director of lands and forests, says that has been factor, but he also says the UMPs the department is working on now are more involved than earlier ones, and the expectations are higher.

"At the same time, with the snowmobiling issues and some of the real challenges that were in all the unit management plans that kept tripping us up and hanging up the unit management plans, it took us several years but we've resolved those issues. So during those years, the planning process slowed down."

Now, the process is back on track, Davies said. He said there are plans covering 80 percent of the Forest Preserve lands in the Park and the remaining plans, including the plan for the Saranac Lakes Wild Forest, will be completed in the next few years.

For Drury, that day can't come soon enough. He says the Saranac Lakes plan is the second-most important plan in the Park, behind the High Peaks Wilderness plan. That one took the state more than two decades to craft.

"I look at the Saranac Lake Wild Forest, and I see tons of potential for recreational trails and multi-use trails," Drury said. "Without that plan, I don't think we have a chance of developing that potential."

When a plan for the wild forest is finally completed, that technically isn't the end of the process. Each UMP is supposed to be reviewed every five years, something that's happened rarely, if at all.

Adding to the challenge, the state continues to add more land, like the Finch, Pruyne acreage, to the Forest Preserve.

All of this begs a question: Is there another way to plan for management of the Park's state lands? Davies says that's something that's being discussed.

"I do think now it's an appropriate time to stand back, look at the information we've put together in the unit management plans and start looking at these areas in much larger regional complexes, and that's what we are starting to do. We are starting to look at the Park in four or five different large regional complexes, and already starting the outreach to the communities and different stakeholder groups to start that process."