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Green groups want big new wilderness in Adirondacks

by Brian Mann

Governor Andrew Cuomo has committed New York state to buying nearly 70,000 acres of land that will be added to the Adirondack forest preserve over the next five years.

It's one of the largest conservation projects in the Park's history. But buying the land is only the first step in figuring out how it should be managed in the years ahead.

Town and county leaders hope the land around Newcomb and North Hudson will become a major tourist attraction, with new opportunities to paddle stretches of the Hudson River and fish wild trout-filled lakes.

But a growing number of environmental groups in the park say much of the land should be designated as wilderness, a classification that could sharply limit public access.

Peter Bauer will take over as executive director of Protect the Adirondacks this summer. Adirondack green groups generally agree that a big chunk of the former Finch Pruyn timber lands should be formed into new wilderness areas, but their visions and key details differ widely. Let's start with Protect the Adirondacks, based in Lake George, which is calling for a new wilderness of roughly 39,000 acres that would be formed along the upper reaches of the Hudson River.

"We see a real dynamic 39,000-acre wilderness area that at its heart would protect about 22 miles of the Hudson River," says Peter Bauer, the group's executive director.

Bauer's group is considered one of the most aggressive environmental organizations in the park. It's drawn headlines over the last year for suing to block the resort development in Tupper Lake.

But Protect is proposing a fairly modest expansion of the Park's wilderness. The plan includes a lot of less restrictive wild forest-classified land and includes the maintenance of access roads that would allow the public to reach new camping and paddling areas.

"We're very mindful of public access and actually a wide variety of public access in this wilderness proposal," Bauer says. "We recognize that the Hudson is a serious river and there needs to be access."

Protect's plan includes long wild forest corridors that would allow key roads to remain. It also would allow float plane trips to continue to Pine and First Lakes on the border of the proposed wilderness.

The Adirondack Council, headquartered in Elizabethtown, is calling for a much larger new wilderness area, with significantly less wild forest – and less road access. John Sheehan is the Council's spokesman: "Essentially this would consolidate Finch land with existing forest preserve.

Sheehan says the project would "create a single 72,000 acre wilderness area that would be the most amazing collection of wild rivers in the Northeast."

While Bauer's group has signed off on the idea that key gravel access roads will be maintained, Sheehan says the Council wants most of them removed. "Most of the roads that [Department of Environmental Conservation] has talked about wanting to keep open in this area are roads that we don't believe ought to remain open", Sheehan says. "The ones that make long incursions into the central portions of this parcel are those that we would prefer not to remain open at this point."

Sheehan acknowledges that that's likely to be controversial. If the Boreas Pond road is removed, paddlers could be forced to make a five-mile portage to the nearest put-in.

Closing roads could also make flatwater portions of the Hudson difficult to access.

But Sheehan says maintaining roads would likely mean people carrying invasive species into protected area and would mean too many people camping, paddling and fishing in sensitive areas.

The Council also opposes allowing floatplanes on Pine and First lakes.

Governor Andrew Cuomo (R) with Bill Ulfelder, Executive Director of the Nature Conservancy in New York, signing the Finch Pruyn deal Sunday in Lake Placid. Photo: Brian Mann
That more restrictive view is shared by Adirondack Wild, based in the Schenectady County town of Niskayuna, where Dave Gibson is calling for most roads to be removed – and for state officials to implement limits on the number of fishermen and campers. "The roads are part of the challenge," Gibson says. "The overall challenge is to recognize what, say, the Essex Chain can handle in terms of human use and to plan access accordingly."

Gibson said the state should consider imposing a use reservation system "right away."

Adirondack Wild hasn't laid out a specific wilderness proposal – they say a lot more on-the-ground science needs to be done before those kinds of details can be locked in.

But the group's Dan Plumley says limiting recreation access will be the only way to protect sensitive areas.

"Making sure that that area is not too accessible or overly accessible is a good thing," he argued.

When this project was first unveiled, Governor Cuomo touted the importance of these new lands to the Park's ecology – but he also described the former finch lands as an important new tourist attraction.

Finding that balance will be tricky.

In addition to input from environmental groups, the DEC is also hearing proposals for the Finch lands from local government officials, hiking and paddling clubs and sportsmen's groups.

Once the Conservation department develops its plan, public hearings will be held by the Adirondack Park Agency.

The Finch project was brokered by the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, which hasn't taken a position on possible wilderness classification. For more about the deal, with maps and photos, go [here](#).