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Tree cutting plan stalls Environmental groups fear impact of easing rules on clear-cutting in Adirondacks

By Brian Nearing

ALBANY — The Adirondack Park Agency is slowing a proposal that would make it easier to give permits for clear-cut logging, after environmental groups had protested.

The park agency pulled the proposed changes from its meeting agenda for Thursday to allow time to consider the concerns.

"APA is reviewing extensive public comments and plans to meet with stakeholders on the proposal. We will bring the matter to a vote when that process is complete," APA spokesman Keith McKeever said Friday. "At this time, it is not expected that any formal action will be taken on the permit at next week's meeting."

Currently, the APA requires an environmental review before its commissioners will consider permits to clear-cut 25 acres or more. Permits are rare, with only three issued in recent decades.

Clear-cutting involves taking all trees in a parcel, rather than selectively cutting trees, and was rampant in the Adirondacks during the 19th century. Public concern over large areas of clear-cut forest helped foster the political consensus to create the Adirondack Park more than a century ago.

Under a proposal unveiled Nov. 30, the agency could issue clear-cut permits without environmental reviews if the owner of the property had sold a conservation easement to the state, was in a state-approved tax abatement program, or was certified by either of two outside not-for-profit groups, the Forest Stewardship Council or the Sustainable Forest Initiative.

More than a million acres of privately owned land in the six-million acre park would fall into these categories.

The proposal would empower APA staff to issue clear-cut permits, without any vote of the commissioners; would not require public notice before logging started and would not set a maximum limit on the amount of forest that could be clear-cut. Permits would carry no expiration date.

Environmental groups that worried the change could open up hundreds of thousands of acres to clear-cutting applauded the APA decision to continue studying the issue rather than vote next week.

"The APA got the message that this is not a good idea," said Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, a not-for-profit advocacy group. "It was clear that the APA was trying to rush this through without any supporting evidence and by not holding a formal public hearing."

In November, the APA had voted that the change would not have any harmful environmental impact, and thus, would not require a public hearing before the agency could act.

The idea that clear-cutting could occur on 750,000 acres of privately owned lands where the state paid about \$150 million for conservation easements was particularly troubling, Bauer said. The state Department of Environmental Conservation, which is responsible for managing the lands where the state had purchased conservation easements, did not submit comments to the APA about the proposed clear-cut rules.

"The public has a clear expectation that conservation easement lands will be well managed over the long term and in addition to supplying wood to help the local economy will also protect wildlife, scenic viewsheds, water quality, and provide recreational opportunities. Clearcutting destroys all these other values," Bauer said.

"The agency did the right thing when it took this controversial proposal off its agenda for January," said Adirondack Council Director of Communications John F. Sheehan. "This permit proposal was badly flawed and did not accomplish what the agency said it wanted to do."