

State land could be classified by fall

By CHRIS KNIGHT

RAY BROOK - The first phase in the state's acquisition of 69,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberlands could be classified by the start of the fall.

That's according to state Adirondack Park Agency Executive Director Terry Martino, who spoke at Thursday's monthly agency meeting about the state's December purchase of the 18,294-acre Essex Chain of Lakes tract in the Essex County towns of Minerva and Newcomb for \$12.3 million. Martino outlined how the classification process, which will determine the extent of public access to the property and is being closely watched, will play out.

"Our staff will take lead with the (State Environmental Quality Review) work and the development of the draft Environmental Impact Statement, which then will be presented to the board," Martino said. "We'll follow that with the board's authorization to go to public hearings and the preparation of the final Environmental Impact Statement, bringing that to the board to receive your recommendation."

Once the APA board makes a recommendation on the parcel's classification, it will be forwarded to Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who will make the final determination.

"We're hopeful that we'll complete this work by the end of summer," Martino said.

The Park's green groups want the tract designated as wilderness, which is the most restrictive state land classification, but there are competing wilderness proposals within this community.

The Adirondack Council has included the Essex Chain tract as part of the 72,480-acre Wild Rivers Wilderness, which the group first proposed 20 years ago. The Council's plan would close most of the property's interior dirt roads, limiting access to its periphery.

Another environmental group, Protect the Adirondacks, is pushing 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, including floatplane access to a pair of lakes, than what the Council has proposed.

The Adirondack Mountain Club wants to see the property classified as either wilderness or a canoe area, essentially the same thing.

Meanwhile, sportsmen's groups and some local officials want to see the Essex Chain tract classified as wild forest, which would allow for limited motorized access. If there isn't sufficient access to the property, it will be "severely underutilized," and the economic benefits state

officials have touted from the Finch, Pruyn acquisition won't be realized, Conservation Fund Advisory Board Chairman Jason Kemper told the Enterprise last month.

Regardless of what the state decides, a portion of the property will open to public access this spring. There won't be public access to most of the tract, including the Essex Chain of Lakes, until Oct. 1, when two hunting club leases on a total of 11,600 acres expire.