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Lines drawn over Adirondack tract Level of motorized access is an issue in state's purchase

By Brian Nearing

ALBANY — With the state buying some 69,000 acres of land in the Adirondack Park, the debate is heating up over how many people might see it using cars and float planes, versus walking or paddling.

This week, the state Department of Environmental Conservation issued recommendations on how the public will get access to former Finch Pruyn timber lands that the state is buying north of Indian Lake and south of the High Peaks.

On Friday, environmental groups criticized the DEC for keeping open too many logging roads for vehicle use, and opening up a remote lake in the Essex Chain of Lakes to float planes. But a supporter of the plan said such motorized uses ensure more people get to see the land, the largest addition to the forever-wild Forest Preserve in more than a century.

The \$49.8 million deal includes breathtaking lands and waters that have been private for 150 years — including the Adirondacks' highest waterfall, 250-foot OK Slip Falls, the Blue Ledges on the upper Hudson River, and remote ponds bordering the High Peaks.

DEC spokeswoman Emily Desantis said the agency wants to "allow as much public access as possible while protecting the natural resource." To come up with its plan, she said, DEC met with groups including "the environmental community, elected officials, sportsmen groups and the tourism industry."

Peter Bauer, director of the conservation group Protect the Adirondacks, said the state proposal, which will be presented to the Adirondack Park Agency for review, allows for "far too much motorized access."

Of the 200 miles of logging roads, some of which lead to private camps on land leased from Finch, DEC proposes keeping open about 50 miles, he said. Bauer also questioned a DEC proposal to open Third Lake, on the Essex chain, to float plane use. The plan also continues float plane access to First Lake and Pine Pond.

Bauer said the state ought to keep only about 20 miles of roads open. DEC wants to classify more land as "wild forest," which allows motorized use, and less as "wilderness," which would disallow motor vehicles.

Those concerns were echoed by John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council, who said his group had "serious reservations" because the plan would allow motorized access to areas along the Hudson River. "You can't drive to Mount Marcy, but that does not stop 100,000 people

a year from going there," he said. "(We) urge the state not to create new roads in the park by taking these leased roads and turning them into permanent roads."

Fred Monroe, director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, which opposes more state purchase of land in the Adirondacks and had urged the state not to buy the Finch property, said he supported the DEC plan.

"Local governments here want reasonable access to the land," he said. Monroe has minor reservations about a section of the DEC plan that said private camps on the property will have five years to leave, and that such camps could be moved elsewhere. Monroe said that wasn't financially possible.

After the park agency approves the plan, it will go to Gov. Andrew Cuomo for his signature.

In December, the state purchased the 18,000-acre Essex chain tract. Plans call for the state to purchase the remaining 51,000 acres in three installments over the next four years.