

North Country Public Radio
February 4th, 2013

Essex Lakes could be opened to motorized access

by Chris Knight, in Saranac Lake, NY

Feb 04, 2013 — New York's Department of Environmental Conservation has proposed opening up large portions of the 69,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberlands the state is acquiring from The Nature Conservancy for public recreation.

Among other things, DEC's classification plan would allow motor vehicle and limited floatplane access to the Essex Chain of Lakes tract, which would become a new canoe area.

The plan is drawing praise from local government leaders who've fought for access to the former Finch lands, and criticism from environmentalists who want more the property protected as wilderness.

Most of the Essex Chain of Lakes tract in the towns of Minerva and Newcomb would be classified as wild forest. DEC would allow road access to the property's interior, boat launch facilities for people with disabilities, roadside camping during the fall hunting season and seasonal floatplane access to some of the tract's lakes. A smaller portion of the Essex Chain tract, primarily along a 10-mile stretch of the Hudson River, would become part of a new wilderness area.

Fred Monroe, director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, said he was generally satisfied with DEC's plan. "I was pleased to see there is a considerable amount of access because that's critically important to tie in this property to the community," Monroe said. "If there's to be any benefit to the nearby communities, I think it needs to be accessible to a wide range of users."

But the Park's environmental groups, which had called for all of the Essex Chain to be designated as wilderness, say DEC's plan would go too far. John Sheehan is with the Adirondack Council: "In general, we're troubled by the amount of commercial access the governor seems to be trying to accommodate in this particular case."

Sheehan said bringing large numbers of people to the interior of the property would impact the Essex Chain's fisheries and lead to the introduction of invasive species. He also said providing recreational access is supposed to be secondary to protecting the Park's resources.

"DEC should be providing natural-resource-sciences-based explanations for why they're doing what they're doing," Sheehan said, "but in nearly every case we have instead a commercial or recreational answer to the question, and that is troubling overall."

The APA is planning to take up DEC's draft classification recommendations for the first phase of the Finch Pruyn acquisition in early spring. That will include the Essex Chain of Lakes tract, which is the only parcel the state has closed on so far.

DEC's classification plan also includes recommendations for former Finch lands the state doesn't even own yet. The 22,000-acre Boreas Ponds tract in North Hudson, for example, would be divided into two parcels, one classified as wilderness and the other as wild forest, but it's not scheduled to be acquired until the last phase of the deal in 2016 for \$14 million.

The timeline for the acquisition of all the former Finch lands hinges on the amount of money set aside each year in the state's Environmental Protection Fund. In his executive budget proposal released last week Governor Cuomo proposed increasing the EPF from \$134 to \$153 million. The portion for land protection, including purchases, would increase from \$17.5 million to \$20 million.