

## DEC stresses access to former Finch lands

By CHRIS KNIGHT

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has assembled its draft classification proposals for much of the 69,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. timberlands the state plans to acquire and add to the Adirondack Forest Preserve over the next four years.

Among its recommendations is a plan to turn most of the Essex Chain of Lakes tract in Minerva and Newcomb, which the state acquired in December, into a canoe recreation area.

DEC would also open up part of the Essex Chain tract and other portions of the Finch lands to motor vehicles and floatplanes, a move that's drawing praise from local government leaders but criticism from environmentalists.

"If there's to be any benefit to the nearby communities, it needs to be accessible to a wide range of users," said Fred Monroe, executive director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board.

"In general, we're troubled by the amount of commercial access the governor seems to be trying to accommodate," said Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan.

The classification proposals for the Finch acquisition are outlined in a confidential internal memo sent by DEC Commissioner Joe Martens to state Adirondack Park Agency Chairwoman Lani Ulrich on Dec. 31. The Enterprise obtained a copy of the memo from Adirondack Explorer Editor Phil Brown, who first wrote about the proposals last week in a post on the Adirondack Almanack website.

Martens, in a cover letter to Ulrich, said public access to the Finch lands, which have been off limits to the public for 150 years, is a priority for DEC. The commissioner said the proposal represents a "balanced approach" that provides a range of recreational uses to the public.

### Essex Chain

The Essex Chain Canoe Recreation Area would include roughly 13,000 acres of the 18,000-acre Essex Chain tract and portions of the adjacent Blue Mountain Wild Forest to the west. It would be designated as wild forest and would include opportunities for paddling, fishing, hunting, trapping, hiking, mountain biking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

DEC's recreation plan would let cars and trucks drive to Deer Pond, where a canoe launch, parking area and primitive tent sites accessible to people with disabilities would be built. Another disabled-access launch site would be developed between Fourth and Fifth lakes, and a public portage would extend from Deer Pond to Third Lake, the largest water body in the Essex Chain. Vehicle access from the east would also be allowed.

Floatplane access would continue on First and Pine lakes, as well as to Third Lake in the early spring and late fall under a permit system. DEC has also proposed allowing some roadside camping in the tract during the fall hunting season.

A section of the Essex Chain tract, primarily along a 10-mile stretch of the Hudson River on the parcel's eastern side, would become part of a new wilderness area. The Hudson River Gorge Wilderness would also encompass what is now the Hudson River Gorge Primitive Area, OK Slip Falls, which is one of the state's highest waterfalls, the Blue Ledges and sections of the Indian River parcel, which will provide a key takeout point for paddlers at the confluence of the Indian and Hudson rivers.

"This will be an incredible draw for visitors seeking this unique and limited wild rivers experience, bringing people to the communities of Indian Lake, Blue Mountain Lake, Long Lake, Newcomb and Minerva to seek accommodations and supplies," the DEC memo states.

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#### Boreas Ponds

The 22,000-acre Boreas Ponds tract would be divided into two parcels: Boreas Ponds North and Boreas Ponds South, one classified as wilderness and the other as wild forest, which has fewer restrictions.

The southern parcel would be added to the Vanderwhacker Wild Forest. Its recreational amenities would include a parking area and trailhead access to Boreas Mountain, access to Ragged Mountain Club Road for hunting, and seasonal access to 5 miles of Gulf Brook Road, which would provide access to the Boreas River and Boreas Ponds for paddling, fishing and camping. DEC also would allow seasonal hunting and trapping, and roadside camping, along portions of Gulf Brook Road. Boreas Ponds South would also include a snowmobile connector trail that would link Minerva and Newcomb to North Hudson and Schroom Lake.

Boreas Ponds North would be added to the High Peaks Wilderness Area, becoming what DEC calls "the southern gateway to the High Peaks region." It would provide opportunities for remote, backcountry hiking and camping with access to the Colvin Range, the Dix Range, Mount Marcy and the Great Range. DEC is proposing an intricate trail system using an existing network of logging roads on the property. There would also be opportunities in and around Boreas Ponds for paddling, all-season camping at designated primitive tent sites, fishing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and ice fishing.

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#### McIntyre tract

The 12,000-acre McIntyre Works tract near Newcomb would be divided into three parcels. A southern tract would be added to the Vanderwhacker Wild Forest. DEC would provide motor

vehicle access to the Hudson and Opalescent rivers for paddling and fishing. Parking areas for launching of canoes and kayaks would be created so the public could access Sanford Lake and the Hudson and Opalescent. Primitive tent sites would be designated along some of the old roads and trails in the area.

Lands in the McIntyre Works tract to the east and west would become part of the High Peaks Wilderness. DEC plans to re-establish a trail along Santanoni Brook to give the public new access to Santanoni and Panther mountains, create hiking access from Newcomb Lake to Lake Andrew for camping and fishing, restore historic access to Mount Allen in the High Peaks Wilderness and allow camping at primitive tent sites throughout the area year-round.

Several other smaller parcels in the southern Adirondacks are also referenced in the classification proposal.

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### Praise

Monroe said DEC's proposals were discussed at a review board meeting Wednesday in Keene Valley.

"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.

Monroe has closely followed the planning process for the Essex Chain parcel, as he's a member of the Polaris Club, one of two hunting clubs whose decades-long exclusive leases to the property will run out later this year. He praised DEC's plan to maintain some road access to the Essex Chain, to put in takeouts for canoers and kayakers and to create access for people with disabilities. He also liked the idea of providing floatplane access to Third Lake in the early spring and late fall, as the timing would prevent conflicts with paddlers who are more likely to access the Essex Chain in the summer and early fall.

At Boreas Ponds, Monroe said sportsmen's groups he's talked to think DEC should have allowed road access to continue into the parcel beyond just the first 5 miles of Gulf Brook Road, "but you have to weigh that against the possibility that the easier you make it to access, the more likely it is to get trashed with invasives."

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### Criticism

Sheehan, whose group wants the Essex Chain tract to be wilderness, said bringing large numbers of people to the interior of the property will degrade its "sensitive resources." Providing recreational access to such areas is supposed to be a secondary concern to protecting its resources, Sheehan said, citing the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.

"We enjoy outdoor recreation as much as anybody, but we want to make sure that motorized access occurs in appropriate areas, not the Park's most sensitive landscapes," he said. "This is the most sensitive parcel of land the state has purchased for the Forest Preserve in about 100 years."

Sheehan said he's concerned about potential impacts to the Essex Chain's fisheries by overuse, and the potential introduction of invasive species.

At Boreas Ponds, Sheehan said the wilderness border should be farther south and that the snowmobile connector should follow a power line. He also said providing direct public access to the Boreas River could lead it to be quickly overwhelmed by people and invasive species.

"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."

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Next step

APA spokesman Keith McKeever said the draft classification recommendations for the Essex Chain and Indian River tracts will be presented to the APA board in early spring. A series of public hearings will be held before the board makes a recommendation to the governor.