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Groups Seek Expansion Of High Peaks Wilderness

<http://www.adirondackalmanack.com/2015/11/groups-seek-expansion-high-peaks-wilderness.html>

Eight environmental groups are urging Governor Andrew Cuomo to dramatically expand the High Peaks Wilderness once the state purchases Boreas Ponds from the Adirondack Nature Conservancy.

At 203,526 acres, the High Peaks Wilderness already is by far the largest Wilderness Area in the Adirondack Park. Under the environmentalists' proposal, it would grow to more than 280,000 acres, making it larger than Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado or Mount Rainier National Park in Washington.

"It would give the highest level of environmental protection to the most sensitive lands the state possesses," John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council, told *Adirondack Almanack*. "The state's tallest mountains, wildest rivers, and most sensitive wildlife habitat are located in this relatively compact area."

The council was one of the eight groups that sent a letter to Cuomo on Monday. The others were the Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, Audubon New York, Citizens Campaign for the Environment, Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Advocates of New York, and New York League of Conservation Voters.

On its own initiative, the Adirondack Council has launched a media campaign, called Be Wild NY, in support of the High Peaks proposal.

Protect the Adirondacks, one of the Park's major green groups, did not sign the letter to Cuomo. Peter Bauer, the executive director, said Protect disagrees with parts of the proposal.

The purchase of the 22,000-acre Boreas Ponds Tract – located on the southern edge of the High Peaks Wilderness – will be the last acquisition in a multi-year deal with the Nature Conservancy to add 65,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn timberlands to the Forest Preserve. The state is expected to acquire the tract by the end of the fiscal year (March 31), if not sooner.

The eight groups want most of the Boreas Ponds Tract added to the High Peaks Wilderness, along with most of two other tracts purchased from the Nature Conservancy, MacIntyre East and MacIntyre West; part of the Vanderwhacker Wild Forest; and a few other pieces of state land. They also recommend combining the 45,000-acre Dix Mountain Wilderness and the High Peaks Wilderness – which Sheehan said would streamline management of the lands.

Protect the Adirondacks and the other groups differ on the future of a dam that impounds the Boreas Ponds. In their letter to Cuomo, the groups advocated maintaining the dam to preserve “a special brook trout fishery, and a remarkable paddling destination.”

Bauer questioned the appropriateness of maintaining the dam in a Wilderness Area, which is supposed to be largely free of manmade structures. He noted that most dams in the High Peaks Wilderness have been removed or allowed to deteriorate. He expressed skepticism that the Boreas Ponds dam is needed to protect trout. He also said people would still be able to paddle on the ponds if the dam is removed.

“We think there should be a real conversation about whether there should be dams in a Wilderness Area,” Bauer said.

The conversation, he said, should include a smaller dam on LaBiere Flow, a still-water section of the Boreas River, the outlet of Boreas Ponds.

LaBiere Flow lies about five miles up a dirt road from the nearest highway and about a mile from Boreas Ponds. The state Department of Environmental Conservation is considering keeping the road open as far as LaBiere Flow. From there, people could paddle up the flow and then portage to Boreas Ponds. Hikers could walk to the ponds along the closed portion of the road. In DEC’s scenario, the thoroughfare (known as Gulf Brook Road) would serve as the boundary between Wilderness, where no motorized use is allowed, and Wild Forest, where regulations are less strict.

Sheehan said the Adirondack Council and the other seven groups agree that the parking area should be at LaBiere Flow. However, they want the Wilderness Area extended south of Gulf Brook Road as far as a proposed snowmobile trail that would connect North Hudson and Newcomb. Since the road would then cut through the Wilderness Area, it would be designated a Primitive Corridor to accommodate motorized traffic.

“We want to maximize Wilderness as much as possible,” Sheehan said.

Bauer thinks this is a bad idea. Protect recommends making the road the Wilderness boundary and using it as part of the snowmobile route connecting the two communities. This would reduce the number of trees that would need to be cut for the snowmobile trail.

Some wilderness advocates, including Bill Ingersoll, publisher of the *Discover the Adirondacks* guidebooks, contend that all or most of Gulf Brook Road should be closed to vehicles. This would require people to hike five or six miles to reach Boreas Ponds.

Bauer said Protect does agree with the other groups that most of the Boreas Ponds Tract and other former Finch lands in the vicinity should be added to the High Peaks Wilderness. He also said “it’s worth taking a look” at combining the Dix Mountain and the High Peaks Wilderness Areas.

The eight groups also are calling for the removal of a wooden lodge that Finch, Pruyn built overlooking Boreas Ponds.