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Hike Vs Ride: Debate Heats up Over Next Adirondack Land Buy

As New York state prepares to purchase a trio of connected gem-like ponds reflecting the highest peaks of the Adirondack Mountains, environmental groups are pressing for the waters and surrounding boreal forest to be added to the adjacent High Peaks Wilderness to create a motor-free preserve larger than Rocky Mountain National Park.

At the same time, officials in the tiny, impoverished hamlets interspersed with expanses of state-owned land in the Adirondack Park are lobbying for the former timberland to be given a less restrictive classification than "wilderness," which bans snowmobiles and other mechanized access that some argue bring more much-needed tourism dollars.

The debate over motorized versus "hike-and-paddle" access has simmered for four decades as the state has expanded its constitutionally protected holdings in the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park. It has flared anew since Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced in August 2012 the planned acquisition of 69,000 acres of former Finch timber company lands from The Nature Conservancy in the heart of the park.

The final piece of that acquisition, the 22,000-acre Boreas Ponds tract, will be completed by April 1, Cuomo says.

The Adirondack Council has launched a campaign called "Be Wild NY" to promote creation of an expanded High Peaks Wilderness, saying it would be a powerful attraction to a national tourism audience. The council and seven other environmental groups have proposed expanding it to 280,000 acres from the current 203,526.

"You have an extraordinary opportunity to create a true national legacy, an Adirondack wilderness area here in New York whose scale and positive impacts will rival some of the most famous conservation landmarks in the world," the groups said in a letter to Cuomo earlier this month.

No way, says George Canon, supervisor of the sparsely settled town of Newcomb at the southern edge of the High Peaks. A longtime critic of state land purchases like most of his fellow local officials, Canon said the environmental groups' proposal to classify the Boreas Pond tract as wilderness "would be the worst thing that could happen to towns that surround that piece, in terms of their economic well-being."

The five towns surrounding the former Finch timberlands are finalizing an official position on how they'd like to see the land classified and managed, Canon said. But most importantly, they want part of the tract classified as "Wild Forest," which would allow use of snowmobiles and

bicycles. They also want some of the network of well-maintained timber company roads, and its luxurious former guest lodge, to remain open to public use.

Canon pointed to the plan for another tract of former Finch land nearby, the Essex Chain, as "the perfect example of protecting the environment while preserving the economic use." The recently approved state management plan for the lake-studded tract includes mountain bike trails, lakeside primitive tent sites, car access on some roads, a new community-connector snowmobile trail, and a new bridge over the Cedar River that was approved over the objection of environmental groups.

A focus of contention in the Boreas Pond tract is the 7 1/2-mile dirt road leading into the mile-long string of ponds.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has suggested opening the road to the public as far as LaBiere Flow, a dammed segment of the Boreas River about a mile before the ponds. From there, paddlers could go up the flow until it gets too rocky and then carry their boats to the ponds, and hikers could walk in along the closed section of road.

Some wilderness advocates, including Adirondack hiking guide publisher Bill Ingersoll, have argued for closing the whole road to let the tract return to a natural wild state where hikers can wander far from any road and mingle with the moose, bobcats and grouse that dwell among the bogs, spruce forest and boulder-strewn mountain streams.

But hikers camping in the woods don't spend much money in nearby towns, Canon said.

"This will be contentious," Canon said. "I hope in the long run, we'll be able to come to a compromise settlement that would be appropriate for the economic well-being of the towns."