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Hikers vs. riders debate heats up

Towns, environmentalists lobbying over designation for newly acquired land tract

Mary Esch, Associated Press

As New York State prepares to purchase a trio of connected gemlike 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 land 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 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.

No way, says George Canon, supervisor of the sparsely settled town of Newcomb at the southern edge of the High Peaks. 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 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.