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Dick Booth: Boreas Ponds Should Be Wilderness

by [Phil Brown](#)

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Dick Booth probably won't be on the Adirondack Park Agency's board when it decides how to classify the recently acquired Boreas Ponds Tract, but he is convinced that most of the 20,758 acres should be designated Wilderness, the strictest of the APA's land-use categories.

"The great bulk of the lands, including the ponds, should be Wilderness," Booth told *Adirondack Almanack* on Tuesday, a day after revealing he intends to retire from the APA.

Environmental groups concur that the three linked ponds — with their stupendous views of the High Peaks — should be classified Wilderness, but local towns are arguing for a less-restrictive Wild Forest classification for the ponds and nearby land.

The classification debate is likely to be contentious, and Booth fears that Governor Andrew Cuomo will impose a solution rather than let the APA reach its own conclusions — as the governor did, Booth says, in the classification of the Essex Chain Lakes Complex and the adoption of the complex's management plan.

"I may be pleasantly surprised," Booth said, "but I have seen no signals that it won't happen again."

Booth was the only APA commissioner to vote in March against amending the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan to allow biking and maintenance vehicles on old logging roads in the Essex Chain Lakes Primitive Area. Normally, biking and motor vehicles are not allowed in Primitive Areas. At the APA meeting, Booth accused the Cuomo administration of directing a decision that weakens the master plan as well as protections for the Forest Preserve.



In an interview with the *Almanack* on Monday, Booth said the APA set a bad precedent and asked rhetorically: “Why not put a snowmobile trail through a Wilderness Area? If you can get enough votes, why not do it?”

On Tuesday, APA spokesman Keith McKeever defended the agency’s decision and the process leading to it. “The APA conducted a rigorous public process for the SLMP amendments related to Essex Chain,” he said in an email. “The process included public listening sessions and hearings held throughout the Adirondack Park and State. Nearly 700 people attended these public sessions and the Agency received 832 comments. Amendment alternatives and issues were thoroughly vetted over a more than two-year time period. The recommendation forwarded to Governor Cuomo incorporated a commitment to expand recreational opportunities and public access in ways that will not adversely impact the preservation of state land.”

Cuomo traveled to Elk Lake last week to draw attention to the state’s purchase of Boreas Ponds from the Nature Conservancy. He urged the Adirondack Park Agency to move swiftly to classify the tract, but observers say the process likely will take several months. Booth said he probably will be gone from the board when the decision is made.

Booth’s term expires on June 30, but he said he will stay on for a while if a successor is not named by then. By the end of June, five of the eight citizen seats on the APA will have expired. In a letter to Cuomo last month, Adirondack Wild and four other environmental groups urged him to fill the vacancies with commissioners like Booth, with strong conservation credentials.

The groups suggested five names: Carol Ash, the former head of the state Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation; Chad Dawson, a wilderness researcher and former professor at the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry; Charles Canham, a forest ecologist at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook; Steve Allinger, a retired lobbyist with New York State United Teachers; and Philip Terrie, a retired professor and Adirondack historian.

David Gibson, a partner in Adirondack Wild, which is suing the state over the Essex Chain management plan, shares Booth’s fear that the Cuomo administration will try to impose a decision on Boreas Ponds. He noted that Cuomo has visited Boreas Ponds with the media in tow and came to the Adirondacks last week to discuss the purchase of the ponds. “The governor is heavily involved in just about everything, especially this,” Gibson said.

Without Booth on the APA, Gibson said, “these are particularly perilous times for state lands.”

Gibson contends that the classification and management plan for the Essex Chain Lakes Complex were designed to maximize recreation rather than protect natural resources. “Recreation is important, but not paramount,” he said.

The Essex Chain Lakes Complex is a mix of Primitive and Wild Forest lands, with a snowmobile trail running between the Primitive Area and the Hudson Gorge Wilderness. In addition, floatplanes, mountain bikes, and maintenance vehicles are allowed in places in the Primitive Area.

“If we have a Forest Preserve worthy of the name, then we have to honor basic wilderness principles,” Gibson said. “You don’t fragment the wild-land resource; you treat it as a whole.”

Gibson argues that the Boreas Ponds plan offered by five local towns would likewise fragment the landscape.

Under the towns’ plan, the Boreas Ponds Tract would be divided into 10,621 acres of Wilderness and 9,913 acres of Wild Forest. From the environmentalists’ perspective, the biggest objection is that the ponds themselves — considered the jewel of the tract — would be Wild Forest.

Among other things, the Wild Forest designation would enable visitors to ride mountain bikes on old logging roads circling the ponds. Also, the towns are proposing that guides and their clients; the disabled; and visitors with permits be allowed to drive all the way to the ponds.

Ron Moore, the supervisor of North Hudson, where the Boreas Ponds are located, said the goal is to boost tourism by providing relatively easy access and by offering a variety of recreation. The plan, he said, “provides better access for everybody — the young and the old, the physically fit and the handicapped. Everyone has a chance.”

Though Moore said the towns are not seeking permission to use gas-powered motorboats on the ponds, he is open to the idea of electric motorboats.

Willie Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council, counters that motorboats could be allowed down the road under a Wild Forest designation. “If it isn’t Wilderness, all bets are off for what may be permitted in the future,” he said.