

Press Release

The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks

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Governor Pataki's Snowmobile Plan for the Adirondacks tarnishes his environmental image and breaks key promise he made in 2000

Niskayuna, NY – Governor Pataki's recently announced Adirondack Snowmobile Plan encourages more motorized use of the NYS Forest Preserve and would create new highways through the heart of public lands which are constitutionally protected as "forever wild" according to The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks.

The Association considers the Governor's plan to be an end-run around the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (state land plan), the "forever wild" clause of the NYS Constitution and the Governor's own promise made in 2000 that any significant change to the Adirondack snowmobile trail system would require an amendment to the state land plan and, therefore, a series of statewide public hearings.

The snowmobile plan would, for the first time, authorize widespread use of tracked grooming motor vehicles to groom the narrow trails and natural forest surface of today's combined snowmobile and hiking trails in Wild Forest areas of the Forest Preserve. The State Land Master Plan does not allow the use of motorized groomers on these trails and mandates that snowmobile trails retain the character of a foot trail.

The Association also notes the following weaknesses in the snowmobile plan:

- The plan's environmental analysis is only slightly improved from the 2004 draft plan. The plan fails to seriously note or analyze localized environmental impacts or more cumulative regional impacts on air, water and wildlife, nor does it make any recommendations for undertaking Adirondack specific studies and measurements.
- In its analysis, the 2004 draft and 2006 final plans fail to integrate snowmobile trails on public and private lands in the Park, particularly private lands where

conservation easements permit snowmobiling. There is no map that describes the snowmobile trail system on private and municipal lands despite the presence of at least 1200 miles of such trails. Although it is frequently stated as a goal, the plan fails to offer specific incentives or targets for moving snowmobile routes off the Forest Preserve onto private lands.

- The snowmobile trail mileage cited in the plan has been so frequently altered over the last six months that the public has every reason to be skeptical about its accuracy.
- 14 of the 17 proposed community connector snowmobile routes already have existing routes that connect these communities. This information was provided at a meeting of the snowmobile focus group in May, 2006, but not mapped or described in the plan.

“While we support the Governor’s goals of moving more snowmobile trails off the Forest Preserve and onto private and conservation easement lands, that is not what this plan actually does. What the Governor is proposing is faster snowmobiling on wide, flat forest highways, which is worse than what President Bush did to encourage more snowmobiling in Yellowstone National Park,” says Association Trustee Dale Jeffers. “These wild forest trails would become, in effect, new highways through the Forest Preserve. Governor Pataki in his final weeks in office is charting a course that will erode and, eventually, destroy the Forest Preserve that is treasured by millions of New Yorkers. Apparently, he is willing to do this without a single public hearing. That is wrong.”

The Governor’s Department of Environmental Conservation removed a statement from the prior draft plan released in 2004 which clearly stated that the snowmobile plan implementation would require an amendment to the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan which contains guidelines for the use of the Forest Preserve that have the force and effect of law. The newly released final plan contains no such statement. “By removing this crucial statement, the Governor and his DEC are implying that this merely an administrative matter. They are implying that the Adirondack Park Agency should “play ball,” and simply authorize this plan as being compliant with the state land plan,” says Association executive director David Gibson.

“The Governor apparently feels that wider, flatter, faster motorized routes through our “forever wild” lands can be approved as a mere administrative matter in the final weeks of his administration. We strongly disagree and we are confident that the next Governor will agree with us,” says Gibson.

“The Governor promised the snowmobile focus group in 2000 that such changes would only be contemplated through a state land plan amendment. Now, he is saying that the snowmobile plan can be implemented administratively.” The Association was a member of the Snowmobile Focus Group from its inception in late 2000 to its final meeting in May, 2006.

“We are forced to oppose this plan because it is unconstitutional, violates the state land plan and circumvents the Adirondack Park Agency which has the legal obligation to undertake regional planning,” says Association Director of Park Protection Dan Plumley.

Snowmobile trails must have the “character of a foot trail” according to the state land plan. Because of their width, maneuverability and weight, tracked groomers require the use of heavy machinery to level the forest floor, remove rocks and boulders and otherwise create highways in the woods. The Association believes these maintenance practices and machines equate to violations of the spirit and letter of the state land plan and the Constitution.

The use of these new motor vehicle groomers will also require that thousands of trees be cut on the Forest Preserve so that trails can be widened to nine feet (from the current eight foot guideline) as well as flattened by the removal of protruding rocks. The plans offers no estimate of the number of trees to be cut in order to create the 9-foot trails, but the Association estimates it would be in the tens of thousands. Article 14 of the NYS Constitution only authorizes immaterial tree-cutting on the Forest Preserve. Furthermore, the Court of Appeals ruled in 1930 (*McDonald v. Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks*) that the Forest Preserve was not to be used for artificial, high speed mechanized uses.

“The plan disregards the fragile wild forest character of the Forest Preserve which, if eroded by more and more motors, will not be there for future generations as it has been for all the generations of New Yorkers born since 1894,” continues Plumley.

“The Forest Preserve and ‘forever wild’ are unique concepts that help to define the special qualities of the Adirondack region. The region’s snowmobile trails are also our hiking trails, and one of their primary attributes is their natural, primeval character. Mechanized groomers and wider trails would destroy this natural beauty and turn our beautiful trails into highways. More mechanized equipment simply damages these trails and detracts from a genuine Adirondack experience. It makes no sense to allow the Adirondacks to become ‘anyplace USA.’”

The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks is a non-profit, membership organization founded in 1901 to employ public education, citizen action, public and private partnerships and strong advocacy to protect, enhance, and sustain the wild character, ecological integrity, and mutual well-being of the natural and human communities of the Adirondack region. The Association's Center for the Forest Preserve in Niskayuna serves as an Adirondack research library and learning center.