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NEWS RELEASE

Public Comments Support Wilderness for Finch Lands 4-1 over Wild Forest

*Letters, emails, petitions demonstrate overwhelming public support
for Wilderness at recent Adirondack Park Agency public hearing*

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Ray Brook, NY – An analysis of public comments made during a recently completed public hearing by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) on the official Forest Preserve classification of the former Finch Paper lands and other state lands found wide public support for a Wilderness classification. The APA received over 3,600 written comments and various petitions with nearly 2,500 signatures. An analysis of these comments found that between letters, emails, and petitions the public supported a Wilderness classification at a 4-1 rate over Wild Forest, the second most popular option by public comment.

The APA took public comments on seven different classification proposals, including two variations for Wilderness. Public comments that supported either Wilderness variation or Wilderness in general dominated the comments. A distant second was support for two Wild Forest options or Wild Forest in general. A Wild Forest classification would allow motor vehicle traffic on the interior of the forest. Wilderness would not.

There were relatively few public comments made in support of a Canoe or Primitive option. The APA accepted public comments until July 19th and held eight public hearings around the state, five in the Adirondack Park and three in other areas.

“The APA asked for public comments and the public responded by 4 to 1 backing a Wilderness classification. The choice before the APA and DEC is to ignore the public or support the public’s clear and overwhelming preference for Wilderness classification and management,” said Peter Bauer, Executive Director of Protect the Adirondacks.

“The 4 to 1 ratio of comments to preserve the Essex Chain of Lakes ‘motorfree’ demonstrates that prospective users comprehend that that the fragile ecology and fishery of these 10 small lakes and ponds would be exposed to invasive species, overuse and the loss of remoteness and quiet if floatplanes, motor boats and all terrain vehicles are permitted,” said, Neil F. Woodworth, Executive Director of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The Wilderness option will create a 38,500 - 46,000-acre wilderness area where the Essex Chain Lakes are protected as a motor-less recreation area. The Essex Chain includes nearly a dozen lakes and ponds linked by navigable channels or short carries. The Essex Chain Lakes is a prized lake trout fishery, harbor loon and osprey nesting sites, and are fringed with some of the state's most highly valued wetlands, some of which contain rare plants. Adirondack scientists have identified large blocks of forest, which are priorities for conservation, and a number of them surround the Essex Chain Lakes. The Wilderness option also includes reclassification of existing Forest Preserve lands, including parts of the Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest and the Blue Mountain Wild Forest areas. The Hudson River Primitive Area would also be completely reclassified as part of the new Wilderness.

"Classifying these lands and waters as Wilderness doesn't mean they will be hard to reach," said Adirondack Council Executive Director William C. Janeway. "Parking would be close enough so everyone can enjoy a wide range of outdoor recreational pursuits, including hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, paddling and swimming. That's crucial to ensuring that the surrounding communities benefit from the attention this will draw as the world's newest Wilderness. Traffic would be kept out of the wildest places to protect water purity and native wildlife. That means communities continue to benefit for generations to come," said Willie Janeway, Executive Director of the Adirondack Council.

"The more people learn about the Essex Chain Lakes and other areas just added to the Forest Preserve, the more protective they become. There are strong feelings across the state that we must exercise restraint in how we classify and manage these sensitive lands and waters in ways that transcend our own generation. Wilderness management is the best option for passing along these lands unimpaired to future generations, and to prevent the natural resources from being diminished or degraded, which is also the APA's highest legal priority," said Dave Gibson, Partner, Adirondack Wild.

"The APA has a unique opportunity before them to classify these lands as wilderness, and the public is urging them to do so. This wilderness classification would afford the most stringent protection of these lands, thus protecting the Park for the betterment and enjoyment of generations to come. We urge the APA and Governor Cuomo to listen to New Yorkers and support the wilderness classification of the Finch lands," said Caitlin Pixley, Conservation Association of the Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter.

A coalition of Adirondack, regional and national environmental organizations backed Wilderness classification as the best choice for long-term natural resource protection for these extraordinary lands, providing a wide variety of public access opportunities, and for preserving a wilderness outdoor recreational experience.

"The story of the Hudson River is the story of New York. The idea of protecting a 22-mile stretch of the Hudson as the centerpiece of a new Wilderness Area in 2013 clearly resonated with the public who overwhelmingly supported this option," said Paul Gallay, President and Hudson Riverkeeper.

"This is one of the APA's biggest decisions of the decade and also a big environmental decision for Governor Cuomo. Public comments strongly backed a Wilderness classification to keep the area wild, peaceful and serene. Will the APA act on behalf of majority who favors leaving a few places quiet and untrammled for future generations?" said Eric Whalen, field

organizer with Environment New York.

“People throughout the northeast cherish the Adirondack Park, in part, for its real Wilderness values. For more than 100 years, New York’s leaders have protected the Park and built a Forest Preserve of incomparable wildlands. Governor Cuomo and the APA should seize this moment to continue a multi-generational and bipartisan tradition that supports eastern Wilderness,” said George Gay, Senior Manager at the Northeast Regional Center for the National Wildlife Federation.

In April 2013, the APA approved a public hearing to classify over 21,000 acres in three tracts recently purchased as new Forest Preserve lands by the State of New York from The Nature Conservancy. These lands are the first of 69,000 acres that Governor Cuomo committed to buy in 2012. The purchase will be phased-in through 2015. The APA public hearings will also reclassify up to 24,000 acres of existing Forest Preserve lands. The seven APA public hearing alternatives include two Wilderness options, one Primitive option, two Canoe options, and two Wild Forest options. The “Preferred Alternative” of the Department of Environmental Conservation is a Wild Forest option. The APA has no Preferred Alternative.

The APA is expected to make a decision in September or October.

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