



Should the state acquire working forests?



Yes

Peter Bauer

Governor Andrew Cuomo courageously plans to purchase sixty-five thousand acres of former Finch, Pruyn & Company timberlands from the Nature Conservancy for the Forest Preserve.

The Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board (LGRB) has attacked this deal saying that buying timberlands for the Forest Preserve violates state policy and kills jobs.

Both claims are false.

On policy, the LGRB says the purchase violates a "recommendation" in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (SLMP). Really? It's baffling that the LGRB thinks that somehow a SLMP "recommendation" is official New York State land-acquisition policy. It's not.

The state's Open Space Conservation Plan is the official policy recognized in state law. It has been revised five times through statewide public hearings and is a product of regional advisory committees that include local government officials. The plan prioritizes protection of the Finch lands in question. To reference any other document is an attempt to deceive.

Now let's look at the job-loss charge.

First, since the open-space plan was initially promulgated in 1991, 87 percent of lands protected in the Adirondack Park were not added to the Preserve but rather protected through conservation easements. Two years ago the state bought easements on ninety-five thousand acres of other Finch lands, those with the highest timberland values and productivity.

Second, this purchase significantly enhances the successful and sustainable Indian and Hudson rivers' white-water-rafting industry. This deal will provide better access to the Hudson Gorge for hundreds of thousands of rafters in the decades ahead. The real businesses, real people, and real jobs of the rafting industry illustrate how the Forest Preserve helps underwrite the Adirondack economy.

Third, the LGRB claims this deal will kill three hundred jobs somewhere in New York, based on a misreading of North East Forester's Association (NEFA) reports. NEFA states that New York has 18,464,222 forest acres (including three million acres of Forest Preserve) that support 57,202 jobs in the state's forests and associated manufacturing, which boils down to three jobs for every thousand acres. But that's not what the NEFA studies were all about. The purpose was to compare the utilization of forests in four states (NY, VT, NH, ME). Here, NEFA found that New York beats our eastern neighbors, who average less than two jobs per thousand acres of forest.

Fourth, Finch managed only forty thousand of the sixty-five thousand acres slated for the Forest Preserve. Twenty-nine thousand acres are wetland, lake, lakeshore, slope, or inaccessible. To replace the lost fiber, Finch created Finch Family Forests, an excellent new partnership with small landowners, which has enrolled over ten thousand acres. Finch also secured another twenty thousand acres in contracts with larger landowners. Finch aims to grow both programs.

Fifth, proximity to forests is key for Adirondack jobs. Most forest jobs are in manufacturing, overwhelmingly based outside the Park. But NEFA reports that New York's forests generate 0.8 tourism jobs per thousand acres, and these jobs are local. Here, NEFA found that New York beats our eastern neighbors, who average around two jobs per thousand acres of forest.

The Finch purchase opens up a dozen recreational gems, such as Boreas Ponds and the Essex Chain of Lakes, among many others. People will want to enjoy these lands.

Because Finch has moved to replace lost timberlands, secured largely from lands that had not been well managed, there's no loss of timber jobs. Because the new Forest Preserve lands will be accessible to the public and enhance the rafting industry, new tourism jobs will also be created.

The state's purchase of the former Finch lands for the Forest Preserve is truly an investment in the economy and environment of the Adirondack Park.

PETER BAUER is executive director of Protect the Adirondacks.

No

By Peter Heckman

If it takes its legal duty seriously, the Adirondack Park Agency should intervene and block the state's deal to purchase sixty-five thousand acres of timberlands formerly owned by Finch, Pruyn & Company

The APA has a legal obligation to ensure the state's compliance with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan. The courts have ruled that this document carries the force of law. The plan includes guidelines for the acquisition, preservation, and management of Forest Preserve land. One of these guidelines states:

Due to the importance of the forest products industry to the economy of the Adirondack region, bulk acreage purchases in fee should not normally be made where highly productive forest land is involved, unless such land is threatened with development that would curtail its use for forestry purposes or its value for the preservation of open space or of wildlife habitat. However, conservation easements permitting the continuation of sound forest management and other land uses compatible with the open space character of the Park should be acquired wherever possible to protect and buffer state lands.

Legal writing can seem confusing. We all remember the statement "It depends on what the meaning of the word is." Word parsing aside, there is little room for interpretation of the spirit of the law in the master plan: the state should not buy large tracts of working forests when a conservation easement would accomplish the same objectives.

Working forests provide economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits. Trees are a renewable resource. Harvesting them creates jobs, but that's hardly the only benefit. Managed forests sequester three times as much carbon dioxide, a global-warming gas, as unmanaged forests. Working forests also can be managed to protect against invasive species, and the lands can be leased to sporting clubs, thereby fostering public recreation and generating tourism dollars.

Working forests contribute about \$475 per acre every year to the state's economy. Forest Preserve land cannot be actively managed or protected. Nor does it directly generate revenue for the state. The Finch acquisition would cost the state economy nearly \$30 million per year.

If the state purchased easements on these lands, it could protect the forests while allowing logging to continue and recreational clubs to remain. It's even possible that the state could generate income from carbon markets. Wouldn't that make more sense?

Recreational club leases are vital to working forests. The Gooley Club had a long, mutually beneficial relationship with Finch, Pruyn. We provided the best stewardship for their resource and offset their costs of ownership and management. As their largest leaseholder, we contributed nearly a half-million dollars per year to the local economy, making us one of the region's largest businesses. It is ludicrous for the state to even consider closing down these important recreational leases!

No one can claim these lands are threatened. Finch, Pruyn took good care of its land, and now they are owned by the Nature Conservancy.

Environmentalists will argue that the deal is "fair and balanced," that the history of exclusive use is unfair, and that we've been offered a chance to "relocate." All untrue. Vandalism has already begun, and if this is a harbinger of public stewardship, then the public should not be allowed anywhere near this precious resource!

This is a conservation-finance scheme gone terribly wrong. There is absolutely no reason for an outright purchase when conservation easements can accomplish so much more at substantially lower costs. Governor Cuomo, are you really willing to waste \$50 million of the taxpayers' money? APA, are you going to fulfill your legal obligation?

PETER HECKMAN is a member of the Gooley Club.



A logger at work.

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