

NEWS RELEASE

Groups Call on Park Agency to Go Slowly, Recommend Wilderness Classification For New Forest Preserve on Hudson River

*Don't Rush Most Important Decision on Public Lands in Years,
Note that Science, Public, Law All Support Wilderness Designation
For Pristine Essex Chain of Lakes, Hudson Gorge, OK Slip Falls*

For Immediate Release: Friday, August 30

Ray Brook, NY – A coalition of Adirondack environmental organizations today called on the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) to go slowly in making a final recommendation to Gov. Andrew Cuomo about the classification and management of roughly 40,000 acres of new and existing Forest Preserve in and around the Hudson River Gorge.

The groups said they were confident the APA would recommend a “Wilderness with Access” classification for the lands if it carefully reviewed the mountain of public comments and scientific evidence presented over the past few months, as well as legal advice from its staff.

“The APA Board of Commissioners should not try to make this decision at its September meeting,” said **Neil Woodworth, Executive Director and Counsel for the Adirondack Mountain Club**. “There is too much valid and valuable scientific and legal information to review before then, plus thousands of public comments. The board must take its time and do a thorough job. Only then should it make a final recommendation to the Governor, who will sign the final order.”

“The public supported a Wilderness classification by a 4-1 ratio during the APA’s recent public hearings. The APA must properly review these comments and issue official responses. This should form the basis of its final decision. We call upon the APA to be deliberative and methodical in its review and decision,” said **Peter Bauer, Executive Director of Protect the Adirondacks**.

“At stake is the fate of priceless natural areas, which are at risk from traffic, noise, pollution and invasive species,” said **William C. Janeway, Executive Director of the Adirondack Council**. “Establishing a core of Wilderness will protect those resources. Parking lots and roads on adjacent wild forest lands should be near to, but not into, the lakes, rivers and most sensitive lands. This slight separation will encourage tourism and new investments in local communities,

but won't harm the unbroken forests and pure waters all of us cherish. This is a balanced alternative.”

“The APA is duty bound to address core classification criteria found in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which has the force and effect of law,” said David Gibson, **Partner in Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve**. “The Agency staff clearly needs more time to conduct this evaluation. These criteria include physical and biological characteristics of the land which affect the carrying capacity of the land or water, such as the nature of the wetlands, wildlife values and wildlife habitats, as well as the sense of remoteness and degree of wildness available to users.”

The organizations said that because the public response was intense and robust at the APA's recent classification public hearings, there are many major issues for which the APA must prepare an official response. That formal response should furnish the basis for the board of commissioners' final recommendation to the Governor. It should not be delegated to staff in an effort to expedite a decision, they said.

In addition, APA Commissioners asked roughly three dozen questions of its staff during the August meeting, which the staff and legal counsel must answer. The answers must be part of the formal public record. The commissioners need adequate time to process the information before making a final choice, they said.

The groups said they supported APA Board State Lands Chairman Richard Booth's assessment that he and his fellow commissioners should review the staff's answers at the September meeting and then wait until the October meeting, or later, to make a final recommendation to the Governor. Booth's request wisely reflected an appreciation for both the complexity of the issues at hand and the burden that has been placed on the staff to compile and summarize a vast amount of information and public input.

Some of the many issues remaining to be sorted out include:

- Compliance with State Land Master Plan requirement for “no material increase” in the mileage of roads or snowmobile trails, or in “motorized uses” in newly purchased and classified Forest Preserve land;
- Legal analysis of reserved float plane rights within the Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers corridor on Pine Lake;
- Legal analysis for reaching a decision concerning each possible land classification, including Wild Forest Special Management Area;
- Analysis of management options for sensitive lake trout fishery under Wild Forest, Wilderness, Canoe and Primitive classifications;
- Analysis of management options for aquatic invasive species prevention and interdiction under Wild Forest, Wilderness, Canoe and Primitive classifications;
- Analysis of management options for designation of CP-3 campsite near the Essex Chain Lakes with road access under Wild Forest, Wilderness, Canoe and Primitive classifications;
- Analysis of legality of all-terrain vehicle (ATV) access to Essex Chain Lakes area;
- Analysis of legality of snowmobile trail access to Essex Chain Lakes area; and,

- Analysis of legality of reconstruction of bridge over the Cedar River under Wild Forest, Wilderness, Canoe and Primitive classifications.

At a series of hearings in July and August, 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 by a 4-to-1 ratio. 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 also comments in support of Primitive or Canoe classifications.

The Wilderness option will create a 38,500- to 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 Vanderhacker 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.

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.

If the APA chooses a Wilderness classification for the lands and waters in question, Wilderness will still comprise only a small amount of the lands and waters now open to public recreation in the five towns that surround the proposal wilderness. Overall, there will still be twice as many acres of land in these towns classified as Wild Forest or state Conservation Easement lands, both of which allow motorized recreation.

The coalition calling on the APA to move slowly is comprised of Protect the Adirondacks, Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Council, Adirondack Wild:Friends of the Forest Preserve.

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