

# Greens raise red flags over 'hut-to-hut' at Boreas Ponds

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The Boreas Ponds tract in the Adirondacks is seen.

Photographer: CARL HEILMAN II/THE ADIRONDACK COUNCIL

Adirondack environmental groups are drawing a battle line in the sand over the forthcoming land-use plans for Boreas Ponds: no "hut-to-hut" on the public lands.

Leaders from the Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Council and other groups said they've heard that state officials are considering designating a portion of the over 20,000-acre, High Peaks-adjacent Boreas tract as "intensive use" to accommodate "glamping"-style amenities as part of a proposed hut-to-hut hiking system that would connect multiday hikes to private inns and other overnight accommodations more upscale than traditional tent camping.

If the state moves to use part of the newly acquired Boreas land for tent platforms, huts, yurts or other facilities envisioned in the hut-to-hut conceptual

plans, the environmentalists say they would view that as a violation of park's constitutional protection.

"It was floated as an idea," John Sheehan, spokesman for the Adirondack Council, said of establishing hut-to-hut at Boreas while speaking on a panel discussion at Union College. "It has never been put on paper that we have seen, and we hope the idea goes away."

In an email statement, DEC officials didn't confirm or deny if an "intensive use" designation was under consideration or whether planning included discussion of connecting Boreas to a broader hut-to-hut system in the Adirondacks. When the Adirondack Park Agency presented four alternatives for classifying Boreas, the plans largely called for some combination of wild forest and wilderness classification – none of the options included an intensive use designation.

But Gov. Andrew Cuomo earlier this year said he planned to build "infrastructure" at Boreas and begin development of a hut-to-hut trail system.

"DEC is committed to expanding recreational opportunities for hikers, bikers, skiers, paddlers, horseback riders, hunters, anglers and others. Outdoor enthusiasts of all skills and abilities will be able to enjoy, for the first time, the most significant addition in the history of the Adirondack Forest Preserve," according to the statement.

The environmentalists say they are concerned state officials are considering using the Boreas classification decision – which is approved by the park agency board with a final say still resting with the governor – to begin realizing the hut-to-hut vision.

If state officials do pursue hut-to-hut accommodations at Boreas, it may serve as a test case for whether that form of overnight recreation is permitted under the state's "forever wild" protection of public Adirondack land. The groups said legal challenges would likely follow.

The environmentalists broadly agree they can support hut-to-hut plans that connect public trails to private overnight accommodations but that any overnight facilities on public land in the park – be it in wilderness or wild forest – cannot be more invasive than the lean-tos and primitive campsites that already dot the park's public lands.

A December 2015 report laid out conceptual plans for a hut-to-hut system through the central Adirondacks. The vast majority of the over 25 potential routes don't require new overnight facilities on state land – one essential point of a hut-to-hut system is that it connects to local communities and private businesses – but the use of temporary facilities on state land was not ruled out.

“DEC asked us to think outside the box and we did,” said Jack Drury, a Saranac Lake-based consultant who helped develop hut-to-hut routes for the state. “We threw out some ideas and certainly it’s not our job to determine what’s legal and what’s not. ”

One route envisioned in those December 2015 plans connects North Hudson to Newcomb, with potential “lodging” somewhere on the Boreas tract. The 5-night-4-day traverse would include southern views of the High Peaks and would become a “top-rated, world-class” hiking route, according to the plan.

If officials were interested in seeing if hut-to-hut could work at Boreas, Drury said it would make sense for them to consider that option during the classification discussion. It would be too challenging to bring back the idea of hut-to-hut facilities after the land was classified.

“Even though we can be developing routes [that don’t involve overnighting on state land] for 50 years, this opportunity exists and it’s only going to exist once,” Drury said, adding that he didn’t know what was or wasn’t under consideration by state officials. “The fact that the state appears to want to explore it makes sense.”

But the greens won’t go down without a fight. They are also concerned about how much other activity will be permitted at Boreas, conceding to motorized access to within a mile of the ponds but not further and hoping to limit bike and snowmobile access.

The Boreas decision “will test whether we can have a forest preserve worthy of it in the future,” David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild, said during the Union event last week. “It’s a big decision.”

Those arguing for more restrictive access and larger wilderness acreage at Boreas point to the property’s proximity to the High Peaks and Dix Mountain wildernesses and its diverse and – considering its history under timber management – relatively pristine state as reasons to restrict access.

“We would lose an opportunity to let one of the most remote parts of the Adirondacks grow wilder in the years to come,” said Peter Bauer of Protect the Adirondacks. “That has generally been the promise of the Forest Preserve: that lands acquired by the state are allowed to grow wilder year after year.”

Local town officials, business owners and others have argued providing greater access to the ponds would benefit the local economy. And that ultimately is one of the primary goals of any hut-to-hut system: Bring people – and their money – into the many Adirondack towns in need of revitalization.

"Boreas Ponds would be one little cog in the wheel to help the economy a little bit if there is reasonable access," said David Olbert, a recreational outfitter and guide in Newcomb near Boreas.