

NY may offer luxury camping services in the "forever wild" Adirondacks

By **Brian Mann**, Adirondack Bureau Chief.
North Country Public Radio

May 30, 2017



All this and a warm bed and fine dining? The Cuomo administration is considering building luxury camping "infrastructure" on the Boreas Ponds lands in Essex County. NCPR file photo: Brian Mann

Imagine if you could hike across much of the Adirondack Park while sleeping in a soft, warm bed every night with someone to cook your meals. The Cuomo administration is quietly developing a plan that would bring "hut-to-hut" style luxury camping to the North Country. Green groups like the idea, but only if the lodging and luxury "glamping" takes place on private land and not on the forever wild forest preserve. That's become a major sticking point, one that threatens to complicate the already fierce debate over how to classify the new Boreas Ponds tract in Essex County.

Developing the Adirondack Park "asset"



Governor Andrew Cuomo paddling on Boreas Pond in North Hudson. NCPR File Photo: Brian Mann

When Governor Cuomo visited Lake Placid last month, he repeated an idea he's been pushing for years – it's an argument that the Adirondack Park is an economic asset that can drive local economies. "It can't just be preserving the asset without doing economic development," he said.

So the question is how to do that? In recent weeks, the Cuomo administration has quietly floated the idea that the Conservation Department might play a role in developing a luxury camping experience possibly on the state forest preserve. State officials shopped the idea to some environmental groups, hoping to find support.

DEC commissioner Basil Seggos says he thinks a hut-to-hut type hiking route would attract a lot of visitors. "I think there's a good role for us generally on hut-to-hut," he said, adding that "in the Adirondacks there will be a place for it. It won't always be on state land. It won't always be front and center on some of the bigger parcels we've acquired."

One of the biggest backers of this idea is Bill Farber, chair of the Hamilton County board of supervisors. The idea of luxury camping linked to an integrated hiking trail has been in the works for years, he says. "In the initial phases, nobody was talking about any kind of hut-to-hut on the forest preserve," Farber noted.

But when they developed a map for a possible trail system that included overnight lodging, possibly in yurts or upscale tents, it became clear that some hospitality services would need to be situated on forest preserve parkland. "The hike is just too far to get from Point A to Point B and that's a challenge," he said.

"It's just too much..."

Environmental groups hate this idea. Not the idea of upscale glamping or hut-to-hut hospitality, but the idea that the DEC would offer some kind of hosted camping experience on the forever wild forest preserve.

"It's just too much for the forest preserve," said Neil Woodworth, who heads the Adirondack Mountain Club. "Providing beds and sleeping gear and providing meals." This isn't just a question of taste or personal preference. Woodworth and others are convinced that established case law would make this kind of thing illegal.

"This was not the kind of primeval wilderness experience they talked about," he said.



Peter Paine, Jr. NCPR file photo: Brian Mann

Peter Paine agrees. In the 1970s he wrote and edited the State Land Master Plan – that's the chief legal document that defines how the Adirondack Park's public lands should be managed by the DEC. He says the hut-to-hut proposal now being discussed wouldn't survive a court challenge.

We see DEC never quite able to make up its mind... protector of Article XIV or a developer of the back country.

"The State Land Master Plan very specifically sets forth structures and uses that are permissible on the forest preserve and this structure and use is not permissible on the forest preserve."

Paine says this proposal by the Cuomo administration reflects a long-standing tension with the Conservation Department about its mission. "We see DEC never quite able to make up its mind whether it's the protector of Article XIV or

a developer of the back country." Article XIV is the section of the state constitution that describes Adirondack Park Lands as forever wild.

Looking for a hut-to-hut plan that would survive a legal test

Bill Farber in Hamilton County disagrees. He says a handful of hut-to-hut style amenities could be developed on the forest preserve with no more environmental impact than come from seasonal hunting camps. "I know there's been a huge amount of resistance, pushback," he acknowledged.

He said supporters of the hut-to-hut model understand the state constitution and the limitations imposed by SLMP and are developing a plan that satisfies the law. "We're not proposing cabins on the forest preserve," he said.

What about Boreas Ponds?

Complicating this is the fact that the hut-to-hut proposal has become entangled in the fiercely political debate over how to manage the new Boreas Ponds tract in Essex County. Green groups think the 20,000-acre parcel near the High Peaks should be mostly wilderness.



New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Basil Seggos. Photo: [NYS DEC](#)

In budget documents released this spring, the Cuomo administration wrote that it hopes to "construct infrastructure at Boreas Ponds in the Adirondacks and build trails as part of the 'hut-to-hut' system." DEC commissioner Basil Seggos says he's still not sure Boreas Ponds in the town of Hudson is the right place for a glamping-style facility, but it might be.

"I think it's too early to tell, honestly. We don't have a classification package from the APA, so we don't know what's possible yet," he said.

Backroom negotiations over the future of Boreas Ponds have grown intense and the Adirondack Park Agency has repeatedly delayed a vote on new land classification for the lands. Meanwhile, environmental groups have signaled that a lawsuit is a near certainty if the DEC proposes establishing hospitality services on state Park lands.