

To some wilderness advocates, Boreas Ponds compromise goes too far

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The Boreas Ponds tract in the Adirondacks. Carl Heilman II/the Adirondack Council

Some Adirondack wilderness advocates argue a proposed compromise to give the Boreas Ponds tract both "wilderness" and "wild forest" designations marginalizes the tract's environmental value and sacrifices a chance to preserve pristine wildlands.

But one of the state's most prominent Adirondack groups and other supporters of the compromise say it is the best possible outcome, given the practical realities of hashing out a land classification that both satisfies environmental concerns and meets the aims of local governments and Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration.

Adirondack Wild and the recently-formed Adirondack Wilderness Advocates oppose the compromise, deriding it as a product of deal-making, not of scientific evaluation.

The entire 20,543-acre Boreas Ponds tract, acquired by the state in 2016, would have been a good candidate for wilderness, proponents argue, giving the forest a chance to reclaim roads once used by the timber company that previously owned the property.

“It’s basically a compromise that eviscerates the wilderness potential here that future generations, I think, would come to really appreciate,” said David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild.

The proposed classification would establish more than 11,000 acres of wilderness encompassing the Boreas Ponds themselves, but more than 9,000 acres would be classified as wild forest. A road corridor leading from Blue Ridge Road to within 590 feet of the base of the ponds would demarcate the wilderness-wild forest boundary.

Gibson said it was a “failure of imagination” on the part of state officials and environmental groups that forced parties into a negotiation over how to satisfy various stakeholders – if only partially – instead of seizing a chance to consider how the property could be preserved as wilderness. The wilderness advocates had called for nearly the entire property to be classified as wilderness, which would restrict motorized access to the Boreas Ponds tract. That would mean a hike of more than 7 miles would be required to access the land.

The Adirondack Park Agency governing board is scheduled to consider the Boreas Ponds classification at its monthly meeting on Thursday and Friday.

Supporters of the compromise argue a far worse classification was possible, citing ideas like allowing mountain biking through more of the property or establishing so-called “glamping” spots, which utilize high-end camping facilities like cabins or yurts.

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, last week called the compromise “the best that could be achieved with the Cuomo administration,” while also defending the protection of the ponds.

“The road to compromise was built on the ruins of bad ideas that the governor and state agency leaders embraced and reluctantly rejected as unworkable or

illegal," Bauer wrote in the Adirondack Almanack this week. "Through many conversations with state leaders over the past year, it's easy to see just how bad the Boreas classification could have gone. Think wild forest everywhere."

The Adirondack Council also trumpeted the compromise classification, highlighting the resulting addition of new acreage into the High Peaks Wilderness and establishment of a wilderness connection between the High Peaks and the Dix Mountain Wilderness.

While the council didn't achieve everything it wanted in the classification negotiations, spokesman John Sheehan said Tuesday the compromise is far better than what would have resulted if all environmental groups refused to budge from a full-wilderness position.

"I would love to say there have been previous administrations who are pure in thoughts about wilderness, but it has always been a political process, and it will always be," Sheehan said.

As the proposed classification is outlined, road access would be possible to within 0.1 mile of the ponds, though exactly where public car access will be allowed would be detailed as part of a unit management plan that follows any land classification decision.

Sheehan acknowledged the proposed classification enables motorized access closer to the ponds than the Adirondack Council supports. But he said the group hopes to mitigate motorized access by setting the main parking lot about 3 miles from the ponds in the management plan.

"We may have to fight this battle more than once to try and keep motorized vehicles away from the pond," Sheehan said.

Tyler Socash, a 31-year-old wilderness proponent in Lake Placid, in November hiked nearly 50 miles from the entrance to the Boreas Ponds tract, through the new state lands, into Panther Gorge and down to the Adirondack Park Agency headquarters in Ray Brook. He delivered a petition of nearly 2,000 signatures of other supporters for wilderness to the state agency tasked with setting the land classifications.

On Tuesday, he called the compromise a "bastardization" of wilderness by trading protection of the ponds for car access to within 600 feet of them.

"It was disheartening to see such a wild place opened to mechanized access," Socash said.

He ticked off lake after lake already easily accessible by road, arguing Boreas Ponds provides the state an opportunity to preserve the remoteness of a such a large body of water with expansive views of the High Peaks.

"You can put a road up every mountain to every pond, but you have to consider what do we lose when we put a road to every pond," Socash said. "We lose a sense of wilderness. There is more to wilderness than just an outline on the map; it has to feel remote and wild."

He also expressed disappointment with the Adirondack groups that participated in developing the classification compromise, saying he worried "the definition of wilderness was at stake."

"I'm hopeful the green groups can think of this as a loss instead of a compromise," he said. "No matter who the governor may be, no matter who the DEC commissioner is, the green groups should champion the strongest levels of land protection whenever and wherever they are warranted. The torch of preservation is in their hands, and it's a burden to carry."