

The Boreas Ponds deal was cut long before Friday's vote. Does this matter?

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Tyler Socash, an activist from Keene, pictured here on the shores of Boreas Ponds. He wanted more wilderness in the classification and he thinks the Park Agency process didn't reflect public sentiment. Photo: provided

The Adirondack Park Agency commission voted 8-to-1 on Friday to approve a classification plan for the Boreas Ponds tract in Essex County. The plan will add roughly 11,000 acres to the High Peaks Wilderness and it prevents development on a vast swath of the Park. But a small group of environmental activists say it does not go far enough.

They wanted more wilderness and they also say much of the land classification plan was cooked up in back rooms and Albany deal-making long before Friday's official decision.

Process aside, it was a historic day for the Park

Friday's vote marked the capstone of the massive \$110 million Finch Pruyn conservation deal. It swept up more than 160,000 acres and reshaped the Adirondack Park, adding tens of thousands of acres of new protected land, opening whole rivers, lake systems, and mountains to public reaction.



*APA chair Sherman Craig from Wanakena.
NCPA file photo: Brian Mann*

APA chairman Sherman Craig described the moment as historic on Friday. "I thank the governor for the vision of adding new lands to the forest preserve and the incredible luxury that that provides us and future generations," Craig said.

The Park's biggest green groups, the Adirondack Council, the Adirondack Mountain Club, the Nature Conservancy, Protect the Adirondacks and others hailed this moment as an important compromise. So did local government leaders including Bill Fred Monroe who heads the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board.

"I think local government generally supports this compromise. It includes much of what local government supported, obviously not all of it," said Monroe, though he typically opposes new state land purchases in the Park.

On the Boreas Ponds tract, what local leaders wanted was road access that would allow paddlers and campers and hunters to drive fairly close to the water. They also wanted the existing logging road to be used in winter as part of a snowmobile connector trail. They got that with the APA's decision to leave most of Gulf Brook road open.

Wanted: More wilderness, more transparency

But those provisions for motorized access and recreation angered some environmental activists who wanted the entire Boreas tract classified as wilderness, which would have meant no roads, no snowmobiles.



Chad Dawson, a leading writer and thinker on the subject of wilderness, voted no on the Boreas classification. Photo: SUNY Potsdam

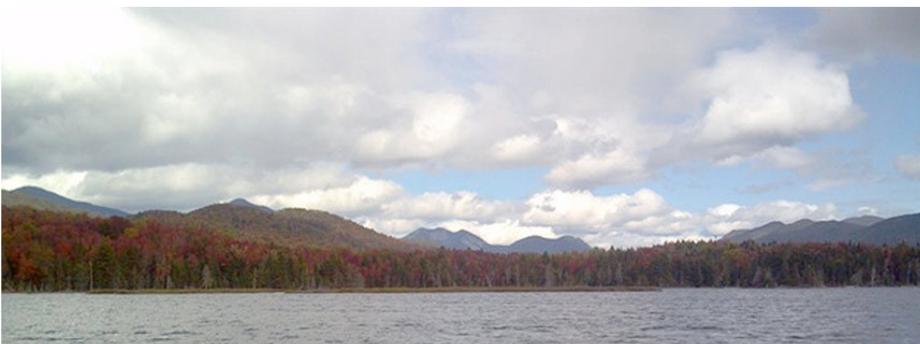
"What Boreas Ponds represented to a lot of us was, wow, this could be one of the most remote places left in the entire Northeast," said Tyler Socash an activist from Keene. He acknowledged that this deal, as approved, will already weave together one of the biggest tracts of wilderness in the eastern U.S.

But he says closing the road and banning snowmobiles would have made it even better. "It's more than just a distance [from the highway]. It is a feeling, a feeling down in your soul that you are in a magical far-away place."

That argument convinced just one APA commissioner, Chad Dawson. He voted against the Boreas classification that included the road. Dawson noted that a lot of the public comment on Boreas during APA hearings also called for more wilderness.

"A majority of the people said they wanted more wild areas, wilder areas. They wanted areas that were healing. I don't know why that gives people hope, I don't know how that works. But it does. I feel it, they feel it. I'm their voice. I respectfully vote no."

Did getting to Yes mean cutting a deal?



A view from the water on Boreas Ponds. NCPR file photo: Brian Mann

But APA chairman Sherman Craig pointed out that in order to get local town on board with this plan, compromise was necessary. He pointed to long talks between the state Conservation Department, the Nature Conservancy and local leaders.

"Some of you don't realize that in order for the state to buy land like this, the towns had to agree," Craig said. "Part of those negotiations resulted with the guarantee that access, recreational access would be available for the new lands purchased."

The Environmental Protection Fund which is used to purchase new park land, gives local leaders a veto. The Nature Conservancy, which engineered this massive land deal, has acknowledged that it worked with state officials and town supervisors, carving out a plan that effectively guaranteed local towns that some kinds of motorized access would be allowed.

Stuart Gruskin is chief of conservation for the Conservancy in New York state. He described the talks that began in 2007 when the Finch Pruyn conservation deal was first being hashed out. "The conversation went from is this possible to do because of the local vetoes to saying what is it that the communities will be interested in in order to make this happen?"

Without that kind of negotiation, it appears unlikely that this land would have been added to the forest preserve. Towns would almost certainly have rejected the proposal. That's why most green groups say they're happy with the compromise, even when they had doubts about the process.

Peter Bauer with Protect the Adirondacks is one of the environmental leaders who says the compromise was a win. "This has been an unusual process," he acknowledged, describing the political maneuverings in the Adirondacks and in Albany. "In my time over the last 25 or 30 years watching these issues pretty closely in the Adirondacks, I've not seen an instance where the governor's office gets involved in the nitty-gritty of Agency decisions right down to drawing lines on a map."

But some, like Dan Plumley with Adirondack Wild, say those backroom talks short-circuited what should have been a more public, more open-ended debate by the Park Agency. "This agency was handed a decision not fully vetted through science and certainly not considering the will of the people of New York state." At least one APA commissioner said he too would have liked to have seen more transparency:

"If there are conversations that go back to the governor and local towns many, many years [ago], I wish there were some way to get them on the record so we could all understand, so it could be part of the final decision-making process," Dawson said, [quoted in the Adirondack Daily Enterprise](#).

"If there were promises made, if there were some kind of agreements that were reached, then we would like to know where it is and what it means."

This plan, more than a decade in the making, now goes to the governor's desk. Governor Cuomo is expected to sign off on the compromise. The DEC and the Park Agency will then develop a more specific unit management plan detailing exactly how public recreation on the Boreas Tract and the expanded High Peaks Wilderness will be managed.