

Cuomo approves Boreas Ponds compromise

Long debate about classification settled

Stephen Williams,
The Daily Gazette

March 20, 2018



The Boreas Ponds tract is pictured. Photographer: Carl Heilman II/Wild Visions, Inc.

ADIRONDACKS -- Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo on Tuesday approved designating much of the Boreas Ponds tract as wilderness where no motor vehicles will be allowed, though vehicles will be able to use an existing road to drive within a mile of the ponds.

The governor signed off on a [compromise recommended](#) by the Adirondack Park Agency in January and supported by a number of environmental groups, though not all.

The decision comes after two years of debate that has been among the most intense in the recent history of the Adirondacks about the 20,000-acre property's future. The ponds, seven miles from the nearest paved road, have a spectacular view of the High Peaks from the south.

The APA recommendation was considered a compromise between wilderness advocates and officials in the five towns around the ponds, who believe allowing public access directly to the ponds would have the most tourism development potential.

The Boreas Ponds were the last lands to be classified among the 65,000 acres the state has acquired from The Nature Conservancy as part of a historic deal under which the state has acquired forested lands that once belonged to Finch, Pruyn & Co.

Cuomo's statement on the classification noted the potential economic benefits to local communities, which hope to develop a stronger tourism industry.

"The Adirondack Park is a national treasure, and acquisition of the Boreas Ponds tract is a landmark expansion to conserve the region's natural beauty and create new economic opportunities for communities in the park," Cuomo said. "On behalf of all New Yorkers, I am proud to approve this classification package that strikes the right balance between preservation and access, and I encourage visitors from all around the world to explore and enjoy the Adirondack Park."

About 11,000 acres around the ponds will be managed as Wilderness, while 9,000 acres around and south of Gulf Brook and Boreas Ponds roads will be managed as Wild Forest, leaving open the possibility of some human structures.

In the same announcement, Cuomo also classified the MacIntyre East and MacIntyre West tracts, also part of the Finch Pruyn deal and totaling more than 13,000 acres, as wilderness.

Cuomo's decision to classify the ponds as well as the MacIntyre lands as Wilderness, where vehicles aren't allowed, means they can be added to the adjoining High Peaks Wilderness and adjoining Dix Mountain Wilderness to create a new nearly 275,000-acre Wilderness Area. That area would be the third-largest wilderness east of the Mississippi River and the largest in the Northeast.

The Adirondack Council and Adirondack Mountain Club both praised the classification package.

"This classification package brings 25,000 acres of new Wilderness to the Adirondacks at a time when overcrowding is harming the ecology of the park's most fragile lands, so the expansion is very welcome," said William C. Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council.

The BeWildNY Coalition, which includes the council, the Adirondack Mountain Club, Environmental Advocates of New York and others, said it has received assurances from the state Department of Environmental Conservation that the state will adopt a system of "graduated access," in which the main public parking will remain where it is now, about 3.5 miles from the ponds.

The roads are in place from when Finch Pruyn had a recreation camp on the ponds. That structure was removed after the state bought the property in 2016.

Under the planned access system, people with canoes and kayaks could drive them as far as LaBier Flow, about a mile from the ponds. A forest ranger posted as LaBier Flow would operate a gate and could allow people with disabilities to drive to a small parking lot just over 500 feet from the dam at the south end of the ponds.

Not all environmental groups are happy, however, believing that the southern half of the property closer to Route 28N should be classified as Wilderness rather than Wild Forest.

"It's not the kind of alternative that thinks about the future and what people will want in the future, and that's a great wilderness experience," said David Gibson of Ballston Lake, a partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

Adirondack Wild maintains that the entire 20,000-acre Boreas property should be Wilderness. "It could have been much worse from a wilderness perspective, but they missed a great opportunity," Gibson said.

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, said Cuomo's action was expected, and probably the best that could be hoped for given Cuomo's interest in promoting Adirondack tourism.

"This was totally expected," Bauer said. "We congratulate the governor and the APA and the DEC for coming to a compromise on a very difficult decision. We think over the decades to come the public will come to recognize that this is a really spectacular place."

The state now must develop a unit management plan for the newly classified lands. Gibson said Adirondack Wild will urge the state use "wilderness values" as it develops that plan, which will fill in the details on how lands can be used and where trails can be developed.

An initial public meeting will be held at 6 p.m. Tuesday, April 3, at the Newcomb Central School in Newcomb. DEC is requesting written comments by April 20, to R5.UMP@dec.ny.gov.

The tract is located in the towns of Newcomb and North Hudson in Essex County, and has generally been accessed from state Route 28N.

Reach Gazette reporter Stephen Williams at 518-395-3086, swilliams@dailygazette.net or [@gazettesteve](https://twitter.com/gazettesteve) on Twitter.