

LOCAL NEWS

DEC finalizes new rules for the High Peaks

By Stephen Williams
The Daily Gazette
|August 24, 2018



The Boreas Ponds tract in the Adirondacks is pictured.
PHOTOGRAPHER: CARL HEILMAN II/THE ADIRONDACK COUNCIL

ADIRONDACKS -- The state Department of Environmental Conservation has finalized new plans to manage public use of the High Peaks Wilderness and adjoining lands -- plans some green groups think go too far to promote public use.

The plans for the popular High Peaks Wilderness Complex and Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest calls for developing new trails to the Boreas Ponds south of the High Peaks, including allowing some vehicle access within a mile of the ponds.

In general, the plan seeks to draw more people to the Boreas Ponds and Essex Chain of Lakes regions, while trying to address the perceived public overuse of the High Peaks trails off state Route 73.

The update to the plans, which DEC announced were final on Friday, were driven in large part by the state's 2016 acquisition of the Boreas tract. The last update to the High Peaks management plan was in 1999.

There were three public hearings while the plans were being developed, including one in Albany, and more than 2,200 public comments were submitted on the draft plans, containing a range of views. The Adirondack Park Agency gave its blessing to the proposed plans in July.

"Defining DEC's management of the Boreas Ponds and the more than 50,000 acres of land added to these two Adirondack Forest Preserve units will help protect these precious lands for future generations," DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said. "We are excited to implement these management plans, which will facilitate access while ensuring these sensitive natural resources are protected."

Some environmental groups remain unhappy, though they acknowledge the plans are now final, and any legal challenge would be an expensive long-shot. There are worries about how much vehicle access is allowed to the wild Boreas Ponds, and about continued overuse of wilderness areas.

"We're literally at the end of the road on this," said Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks. "There's not much that can be done, except to continue to monitor this."

"The [DEC] work is proceeding, and it's not surprising, but it's still the wrong thing to have done," said David Gibson, managing partner in Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

The plans call for construction of 38 miles of new foot trails, mostly on the 20,000-acre Boreas tract, as well as construction of new snowmobile trails, mountain bike trails and backcountry ski trails. It's what local government officials, hoping to improve tourism options for their communities, wanted to see.

"I think on behalf of the Review Board, we are pretty pleased with the plan," said Fred Monroe, executive director of the Adirondack Park Agency Local Government Review Board, at an APA meeting in July.

Some new DEC projects, like construction of an east side trail up Mt. VanHoevenberg from the Olympic Sports Complex, are already underway. A new Adirondack Adventures social media channel will promote hikes and activities in less-used parts of the Adirondack Park.

Construction of six-car permit-only parking lot within a few hundred feet of Boreas Ponds will begin this summer. The parking lot will have two spots reserved for the disabled, and four spots available to the general public through a reservation system.

"If the general public is able to drive in, than it's not special access for the disabled," Bauer said. "Here, it's not about [disabled] access, it's about a convenience, and that's a departure from the past."

Along the Route 73 corridor, plans call for expanding some parking lots to address the hundreds of cars that park on road shoulders during peak weekends, making permanent the shift of the Cascade Mountain trailhead to the Olympic complex, and closing the current Cascade trailhead and parking lots. The state also plans a new trailhead for popular Ampersand Mountain in Saranac Lake.

"That's really all they're doing, and there are immense challenges all up and down the Route 73 corridor," Bauer said.

Gibson said Adirondack Wild continues to believe that a managed permit system for access to the backcountry is needed, "to assure the public they can have a wilderness experience in the eastern High Peaks."

He said environmental groups need to follow up and be sure DEC conducts a promised study on the carrying capacity of the Boreas Pond property. "It should have been done before they approved this plan. It's going to be an after-the-fact study," Gibson said.

The Adirondack Council shared many of those concerns, and also felt that the process to announce proposed plans in May and have them finalized by August was too rushed, given the level of public interest.

"We felt that parts of it still needed work, and we hoped the department would take that into consideration, but given the speed with which DEC and the APA were determined to proceed, we don't think the public had much of a chance to be heard," said John Sheehan, a council spokesman

Both the High Peaks Wilderness UMP Amendment (www.dec.ny.gov/lands/28320.html) and the Vanderwhacker Wild Forest UMP Amendment (www.dec.ny.gov/lands/22587.html) are available on the DEC website.