

Clear-cutting bill hacked from both sides

Loggers, environmentalists say it would lead to bad forestry practices

By Justin A. Levine, Staff Writer
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Eric Ross, leaning on the truck, the general manager of Adirondack operations for the Lyme Timber Company, talks with members of the state Adirondack Park Agency board and the public, explaining how clear-cutting a forest can be beneficial to the plant life. (Enterprise photo — Aaron Cerbone)

A bill introduced in the state Assembly and Senate for the second year in a row would change the way the state Adirondack Park Agency issues permits for clear-cutting, but both loggers and environmental groups say the bill could lead to poor forestry practices unless it addresses some underlying issues.

The bill — introduced by Assemblywoman Deborah Glick, D-Manhattan, and Sen. Neil Breslin, D-Albany — would require that the APA issue permits for any clear-cut of 5 acres or more within the Adirondack Park, and also require that each permit be voted on by the APA board and that a forest management plan be submitted for each one to the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Currently, the APA issues permits for clear-cuts of 25 acres or more, and those permits can be approved by the APA's executive director without a board vote.

Jerry Delaney — who works in the logging industry and has a non-voting seat on the APA board as executive director of the Local Government Review Board — said the proposed law was needless and would only hurt smaller logging operators.

"It's just unnecessary and burdensome for 5 acres, even for 10 acres," Delaney said. "What's going to happen — and this is what happened with the 25-acre clear-cuts — everyone figured out that if you did a 25-acre clear-cut and then you left a 300-foot barrier between your next 25-acre clear-cut, you could do 25 clear-cuts and not ever trip an agency permit.

"All (the bill's supporters are) going to do is drive similar people to do bad forestry to avoid permitting so they can harvest when they need to harvest. It's my feeling that all this will do is create more bad forestry instead of good forestry, and have unintended consequences."

David Gibson, managing partner of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, also said the bill would disproportionately impact smaller logging operations and have little effect on the large-scale ones.

"The bill needs to be amended to address actual forestry outcomes rather than management plans — as in what is actually left standing on the ground in the way of trees, diversity of stands, micro and macro habitats, connectivity to other forested sites, and probably more," Gibson wrote in an email. "(The) folks that would get drawn into the net of APA jurisdiction under this bill would be those least able to afford it — the small operators and landowners owning tens or hundreds of acres, not tens of thousands of acres.

"Thus, far more people could be economically impacted by the bill without necessarily improving Adirondack forestry in an ecological sense. This could result in an endless series of enforcement cases against small operators who refused to comply because they lacked the capacity and economic resources to prepare management plans as prescribed."

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, said his group generally supports the bill but added that it does not address some underlying issues.

"We see it as a response to the status quo at the Park Agency, which has been not to go out and gather really good information, not to do a lot of oversight, not to investigate what's happening on the ground despite the fact that they've been issuing several major permits a year," Bauer said. "At one point the agency was trying to look at this issue broadly and try and get some answers, but that's been pushed aside and they have decided to just issue permits as rapidly as they come in."

Rocci Aguilar of the Adirondack Council, another environmental advocacy group, said the bill is a good place to start a larger conversation about forestry practices within the Blue Line.

"My sense is that the bill is meant to foster the parties coming back to the table," he said. "It's seen primarily as a method to foster a dialogue that's sort of stopped.

"I think it's an opportune time to take a deeper look at forestry within the park — just to see sustainable forestry sort of front and center again, finding incentives, finding new ways to engage the industry, really taking a holistic look at 800,000 acres of conservation easement lands that are primarily working forest lands. There's a lot of data that sort of points to the need to take a look at what the sustainability harvest rates are in the park."

The bill has been referred to the Assembly and Senate Environmental Conservation committees for the 2019 session.

A similar bill failed to progress out of that Assembly committee when it was introduced last year. Each chamber's Environmental Conservation committee has an Adirondack representative: Dan Stec, R-Queensbury, in the Assembly and Betty Little, R-Queensbury, in the Senate.