

# Trump environmental record worries Adirondack advocates

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*Rain was a common experience in the Adirondacks this winter, where some fear Trump administration policies may accelerate climate change or even renew the threat of acid rain. Photo by Mike Lynch*

Two years into Donald Trump's presidency, Adirondack Park environmental advocates fear his administration has reversed critical protections and momentum for healing the park's ecosystem.

Foremost in their minds is the acid rain that sterilized Adirondack lakes before Clean Air Act amendments and regulations scrubbed coal-fired power plant emissions and gradually restored lakes and ponds for fish and wildlife. But they also complain of a federal government now more welcoming of other pollutants, including carbon dioxide, as the region's forests and snowy winters are changing with a warmer climate.

Trump himself has framed climate change as a hoax, and has used Twitter to tease believers during cold snaps, though average annual temperatures continue rising globally and, especially, in the North Country. On coal, air and other rules, his administration has frequently touted the economic benefits of deregulation, and the president came into office promising to end what he called the Obama administration's "war on coal."

The *Explorer* asked several environmental advocates for their take on the results, and they said the Environmental Protection Agency's failure to strictly enforce pollution controls on Ohio Valley coal plants and the administration's scuttling of the proposed Clean Power Plan puts the park in the sort of precarious downwind position of decades past.

"The Adirondacks take a disproportionate beating," Adirondack Council spokesman John Sheehan said.

The *Explorer* also invited some North Country Republicans to the discussion. U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik's office provided a statement touting her own environmental record without directly speaking to Trump's. "Congresswoman Stefanik will continue to act as an independent leader on preserving and protecting the Adirondacks," it read, "from funding acid rain research, to combating invasive species, to supporting funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Congresswoman Stefanik understands that our environment is also our economy in the North Country."

Ray Scollin, a longtime Franklin County Republic Party head, said environmentalists are right to worry about the administration's lenient stance on air pollution and acid rain. "I'm as disappointed as anyone," he said, noting his love for trout fishing in park ponds. On the climate front, though, he's not so sure the president's withdrawal from the Paris agreement on curbing climate change matters much, when China continues its pollution unabated.

## **ACID RAIN**

Sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide from Midwestern plants rained acid on the Northeast at dangerous levels for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, endangering the park's forests and waters. Besides being positioned downwind of the industrial heartland, the Adirondacks are especially susceptible because the thin soils atop hard-rock mountains offer little calcium to counteract the acid. Fish disappeared from some waters, but returned and thrived after federally mandated controls at the smokestack reduced acid deposition.

In its first two years the Trump administration did not enforce those rules, prompting the Council, the Environmental Defense Fund and some Eastern states to sue. At the same time, when environmentalists and downwind interests petitioned the administration to strengthen the Cross-State Pollution Rule—a standing EPA finding that a state cannot pollute so much that it causes other states to suffer air-quality violations—Sheehan said the administration responded by "yawning and looking the other way."

The U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed the rule's constitutionality in the face of attacks over its costs. But that was before Justice Brett Kavanaugh joined the court—and he had twice ruled against it in his former post as a U.S. Court of Appeals judge.

Deregulation that threatens to return acid rain, mercury and other poisons masks the real costs of polluting, Sheehan said. “They have been essentially dumping their garbage on us for half a century and not paying the costs of disposal in our lakes and streams at the end of the nation’s tailpipe.”

## **CLIMATE CHANGE**

The administration’s rejection of the Clean Power Plan’s downward pressure on fossil fuels halts momentum in fighting climate change that’s already affecting the park, said Peter Bauer of Protect the Adirondacks.

“We’re living through it,” Bauer said. “We now live in a world where it’s as likely to rain as it is to snow in December, January, February, March.” He said it on a January day when it was raining on top of abundant snow in Saranac Lake, not long after Trump had taunted his critics with a tweet during a brutal Midwestern cold snap that he said could use some “good old fashioned global warming.”

“There’s nothing more heartbreaking than watching it rain on new snow,” Bauer said.

Under most carbon emissions scenarios studied in the 2018 National Climate Assessment, high-altitude ski areas likely will continue hosting winter fun through the century if they have the capacity to make snow, as Whiteface and Mount Van Hoevenberg do in the High Peaks.

“They will see, though, a reduction in the season length and (will) have to rely more on artificial snowmaking,” said Mary Stampone, a University of New Hampshire climatologist who co-authored the assessment’s chapter on the Northeast. Lower elevations and cross-country ski trails without snowmaking equipment will have increasingly spotty seasons, she said.

The Northeast has warmed by about 2 degrees Fahrenheit over the last century or so, with nearly that much warming again to come by 2035, according to the assessment, though warming in parts of the region and especially in winter can be higher. Winters in the Adirondacks have warmed much faster than the yearly average—about 4 degrees, according to climatologists at the State University of New York-Plattsburgh. The region’s winters warm more rapidly than its summers because temperatures in the arctic and subarctic zones to the north are retaining more solar energy as there’s less snow and ice to reflect it into space, Stampone said.

The warming already is stressing native brook trout in some ponds without adequately deep pools, and some may not spawn in exceptionally hot summers, Cornell University biologists advised park officials recently. Warmer winters may stress trees by lengthening growing seasons and inviting pests.

“People don’t really realize how important winter is to our whole forest ecosystem in the Northeast,” Stampone told the *Explorer*.

Scollin, the former county Republican chairman, said he worries as much about warming winters and lost skiing as anyone. But he thinks promoting carbon-free nuclear energy would be more effective and practical than hampering the U.S. economy to uphold an international deal that seems destined to fail in keeping temperatures down, and more realistic than renewable energy alone. The Obama administration's embrace of the Paris agreement committed the U.S. to "a lot of effort for no real gain," he said.

## **BAD EXAMPLES**

The administration can't open the Adirondacks to oil and gas drilling or downsize protected areas as it has in the West, because the park is on state and private lands and is not among federal holdings. Still, the nation's move against wildland protections has a way of filtering down to the state level, said David Gibson, managing partner for Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve. The administration allowed the Land and Water Conservation Fund to expire and has undermined ecosystem protections in favor of drilling, which Gibson said sends a "moral message that it's OK and trendy" to chip away at wildlands.

Congress may provide some relief to conservationists. Last week Congress passed a sweeping lands bill that, among other things, would restore and permanently authorize the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and would protect Yellowstone National Park against proposed gold mining near its boundaries. That bill, the Natural Resources Management Act, was awaiting Trump's signature.

In the past, national debates have led to efforts at selling off state parcels or allowing new uses such as bicycles in wilderness settings, he said. "The effect here may be subtle—we have our (state) laws, our constitution—but it's corrosive nonetheless."

The federal government's current environmental direction leaves one longtime park insider grateful that New Yorkers rejected a push for national park status in the last century.

"It is a very good thing that the Adirondack Park remains under local and state oversight, not the federal government," said Liz Thorndike, who served 16 years on the Adirondack Park Agency's board. It was especially evident during a 35-day partial government shutdown when some national parks closed and other suffered for lack of supervision and sanitation.

But Thorndike said she expects the nation's commitment to environmental protection and curbing climate change will outlast and outweigh the administration.

"I think—being the optimist that I always am—that we're going to be OK," she said.