

Adirondack Wild questions bike trail work in Wilcox Lake Wild Forest

By Phil Brown,
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David Gibson, of Adirondack Wild, contends that the state Department of Environmental Conservation violated its own rules when it laid crushed stone on a 250-foot section of the Murphy Lake Trail near Wells. Photo by Dave Gibson

The environmental group Adirondack Wild is questioning the legality of work done this summer on a trail in the Wilcox Lake Wild Forest.

David Gibson, one of the founders of the group, contends the state Department of Environmental Conservation violated its own rules when it laid crushed stone on a 250-foot section of the Murphy Lake Trail near Wells.

Gibson says DEC failed to abide by a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Adirondack Park Agency that sets limits on work that can be done on forest preserve tracts that lack a unit management plan (UMP). The Wilcox Lake Wild Forest is one of those tracts.

In an August 12 letter to Robert Stegemann, DEC's regional director, Gibson said the MOU stipulates that the department may undertake only ordinary

maintenance and minor improvements that “do not materially change the use or appearance of land, trails and appurtenances.”

Gibson’s letter included photographs of the “improved” trail and an adjacent section of unimproved trail to show their differences in appearance. The old trail is a typical dirt path. The modified trail is crushed stone boxed in by lumber.

Gibson says the modified trail violates the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan as well as the MOU.



An unmodified section of the Murphy-Middle-Bennet Lakes Trail. Photo by David Gibson.

The crushed stone was placed over existing logs that had become slippery. In an email to the *Explorer*, DEC says other options it considered for addressing the hazard did not conform to the State Land Master Plan. The department is consulting with the APA over the matter. Gibson said the APA is looking into his complaint.

DEC had described the trail project in a news release in late July, hailing it as “another example of the State’s ongoing effort to grow the outdoor recreation economy of Adirondack communities while protecting this resource for future generations.”

The department says it worked with a bicycle club to harden trail to make it sustainable for multi-use recreation. The news release noted that the trail, which connects Murphy, Middle, and Bennett lakes, is on the route of the Adirondack Trail Ride, a 550-mile route that loops through the Adirondack Park, much of it on public forest preserve.

Gibson, who visited the area after seeing the news release, also questioned whether bikes should be allowed on the trail. "Lacking a UMP, this trail has not been officially designated as a bicycle trail, nor should it be. In our experience, the Murphy-Middle-Bennett trail's surface tread is very unsuited for and clearly not designed for family-style mountain biking. ... We found no marked bike route sign on this section of the Murphy-Middle-Bennett trail. This sector was never designed for travel by bicycles, and the 'rehabilitation,' however professionally carried out, was not done to cause the least effect on the local environment."

DEC's website lists nine other trails in the Wilcox Lake Wild Forest that are open to biking. "Many of them are not in any shape to invite bicyclers, and they are certainly not designed for such use," Gibson said in an email to the *Explorer*.

In general, trails in wild forest areas are open to mountain biking, according to DEC and APA spokesmen. However, DEC can close any trail to bicycles for environmental or other reasons. Bicycles are not allowed in areas designated as wilderness.