

NGOs oppose any future ECO, Ranger merger

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ALBANY — Several non-governmental organizations who advocate on behalf of the Adirondacks and the Catskills recently voiced their opposition to any future merger of State Department of Environmental Conservation Forest Rangers and Environmental Conservation Officers.

The Adirondack Council, Adirondack Mountain Club, Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, Catskill Center, Catskill Mountainkeeper and Protect the Adirondacks co-signed a letter to DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos in December 2019 after Governor Andrew Cuomo issued an order to merge the State Park Police into the State Police, according to a press release.

The groups wanted to express their views in case the governor also had plans to merge the Forest Ranger and ECO division, an idea which was discussed the first year of his administration in 2011 and also prompted a letter.

"Each time the issue has arisen, a diverse coalition has made the case why such a move would trigger a firestorm of protest and prove a disaster for the state's public lands and the outdoor recreating public," the December letter said.

"We continue to feel this way — and felt it was timely to write to you as we have to prior commissioners."

ESSENTIAL ROLE

The organizations also argued that rangers' tasks and training are crucial to the public's protection on forest preserve and other public lands.

"Forest Rangers play an essential role as educators about state land to a public that is highly technology-oriented and often lacking in awareness of their safety, hygiene and broader impacts on trails, lakes, streams, rivers and mountain summits.

"The hiking, camping and paddling public has come to rely on Forest Rangers as being approachable, communicative, informative, educational and prepared in an emergency."

The NGOs also support an increase in the number of Forest Rangers in the upcoming budget.

"There are just 134 Forest Rangers and supervisors for all of New York's public lands and waters, including the three million acres of Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve, a million acres of state forests and other public lands, and nearly one million acres of land under state conservation easement," the press release said.

"This is approximately the same number of Forest Rangers that patrolled a smaller public land acreage in 1970."

STRENGTHEN FORCE

Adirondack Council Executive Director William C. Janeway described the Forest Rangers as "a uniquely skilled force that provides essential, daily care and oversight for our 'forever wild' forest preserve."

"They have done this job well since 1885," he added in a statement. "We need them as much today as we did back then."

"Forest Rangers should not be managed as a group of law enforcement officials, but rather should be managed by the DEC as a separate and distinct unit of trained professionals integral to high quality management of public lands," Protect the Adirondacks Executive Director Peter Bauer said.

Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve managing partner David Gibson said they urge Cuomo not to take the Forest Rangers' skills, dedication and public land safety role for granted.

"We urge him, members of the State Legislature and DEC Commissioner Seggos to significantly strengthen the ranger force in 2020."