After months of public debate and behind-the-scenes negotiations, the Adirondack Park Agency voted in December to prohibit motorized recreation on most of the former Finch, Pruyn timberlands the state purchased from the Nature Conservancy a year ago.

The unanimous decision will create a 23,494-acre Hudson Gorge Wilderness and ensure that the quiet of the remote Essex Chain Lakes will not be disturbed by motorboats. Under the APA plan, the lakes will be the centerpiece of a 9,940-acre Essex Chain Primitive Area.
An APA Map of the classification area.

However, the APA agreed to establish a Wild Forest corridor between the two motor-free tracts to allow snowmobilers to ride from Indian Lake to Newcomb. In addition, the lands north of the Essex Chain also were classified Wild Forest to permit visitors to drive most of the way to the lakes and the Hudson River.

Except for the snowmobile trail, the classification package resembles the proposal backed by environmental groups, which they characterized as “Wilderness with access.”

Willie Janeway, executive director of the Adirondack Council, said he supports the decision. “The Park will be stronger and better than it was before,” he said. “Those lakes and the Hudson will be protected.”

Local political leaders also were pleased, since the snowmobile trail was their top priority. Without the trail, it’s doubtful that they would have supported the proposal.

The trail isn’t a sure thing as it raises a number of legal issues that must be sorted out. However, officials at the APA and state Department of Environmental Conservation say they will do what they can to make it happen.

Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, said the snowmobile trail raises policy issues as well. “The motorized Wild Forest corridor sets a dangerous precedent for Forest Preserve management
whereby lines will be drawn solely to facilitate motor-vehicle uses,” he warned.

In all, the APA classified about twenty-two thousand acres of new state land and reclassified about twenty thousand acres of adjacent Forest Preserve. The new lands include three properties purchased from the Adirondack Nature Conservancy: the 18,230-acre Essex Chain Tract, 2,823-acre OK Slip Falls Tract, and 923-acre Indian River Tract. In addition, the board classified a 160-acre in-holding purchased from the Open Space Conservancy.

The Cedar River. Photo © Phil Brown

It was one of the most important and complicated classification decisions undertaken by the APA. Over the summer, the agency held eight hearings in and outside the Park and gathered thousands of public comments. At one point, Governor Andrew Cuomo visited the Adirondacks to meet privately with local officials, sportsmen, environmental activists, and other stakeholders. State officials spent the ensuing months working out a proposal that would be acceptable, by and large, to all sides.

On the day of the vote, Basil Seggos, Cuomo’s top environmental aide, drove up from Albany to attend the APA meeting. Two days later, Cuomo visited Saranac Lake and praised the classification proposal, which required his approval, as “a consensus solution” that strikes the right balance between protecting the environment and providing recreational opportunities.

“The minute I can approve that plan I am going to approve that plan,” Cuomo said. Under the law, he could not do so for ten days.

In the years ahead, the state is committed to buying another forty-three
thousand acres of Finch, Pruyn lands from the Nature Conservancy. However, none of the classification decisions is expected to be as complex as the one made in December.

Following are the highlights of the APA’s decision:

■ **Hudson Gorge Wilderness Area.** At 23,494 acres, this will be the largest Wilderness Area designated in the Park since the adoption of the State Land Master Plan in 1972. It includes fifteen miles of the Hudson as well as parts of the Indian and Cedar rivers. Other natural gems are OK Slip Falls, the highest waterfall in the Adirondacks, and Blue Ledge, a scenic cliff in the Hudson Gorge. Most of the land came from the seventeen-thousand-acre Hudson Gorge Primitive Area, which was reclassified. In addition, more than six thousand acres of Finch lands, including nearly all of the OK Slip Falls Tract, were placed in the Wilderness Area. A boys camp will continue to own an in-holding that includes OK Slip Pond.

![OK Slip Falls](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

*OK Slip Falls. Photo © Nancie Battaglia*

■ **Essex Chain Primitive Area.** This 9,940-acre tract is named for eight lakes and ponds linked by streams and marshy channels. It’s possible to paddle six of them without getting out of your canoe. The tract contains ten other lakes. Under the Primitive classification, motorboats will not be allowed on any of them. However, floatplanes will be allowed to use First and Pine lakes on the edge of the tract as a result of deeded rights that the Nature Conservancy donated to the towns of Newcomb and Minerva. The agency rejected a DEC proposal to allow planes to land on Third Lake, the largest in the chain. Roads in the Primitive Area will be closed to motor vehicles, but disabled people will be allowed to drive to Fifth Lake along a short Wild Forest corridor.

■ **Snowmobile corridor.** The APA established a six-mile Wild Forest
corridor along the border of the Essex Chain Primitive Area and Hudson Gorge Wilderness to allow snowmobilers to go from Indian Lake to Newcomb. A tenth of a mile wide, the corridor largely follows former logging roads through a narrow valley. It connects Wild Forest lands on the Essex Chain Tracts and Indian River Tracts. APA employees say mountains on either side of the corridor will act as noise buffers, so winter visitors to the Essex Chain Lakes will be unlikely to hear the snowmobiles.

**Polaris Mountain Primitive Area.** This 953-acre parcel on the east side of the Hudson is home to the Polaris Club, whose members continue to lease one-acre plots around their camps. They also retain rights to drive to their camps. The leases will expire on October 1, 2018. The Nature Conservancy will have motorized access to the parcel for an additional year to remove any remaining buildings. After that, the parcel will be added to the Hudson Gorge Wilderness.

**Analysis of the decision**

Mouth of the Goodnow River, a tributary of the Hudson. Photo © Phil Brown

The creation of the Hudson Gorge Wilderness was almost a given. The State Land Master Plan had long mandated that the Hudson Gorge Primitive Area be reclassified Wilderness if the OK Slip Falls Tract were acquired. Hence, all the classification options considered by the APA called for a Hudson Gorge Wilderness, and the towns didn’t oppose the idea.

The debate centered on the Essex Chain Lakes. Local leaders wanted all of the Essex Chain Tract lying outside the Wilderness Area to become Wild Forest, which would have opened the door to motor vehicles, motorboats, snowmobiles, and floatplanes. Environmentalists, in contrast, wanted to add most of the Essex Chain Tract to the Hudson Gorge Wilderness. DEC sought a middle ground: a Wild Forest classification with special restrictions.
In the end, the APA rejected all three proposals in favor of a Primitive designation. The agency’s reasoning is set forth in a lengthy Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS). The document was prepared by the staff and approved by the board at December’s meeting.

In opposing Wilderness, the staff noted that the Gooley Club will continue to lease land on the Essex Chain through September 2018, with the right to drive to camps and use motorboats on certain lakes. These motorized uses preclude a Wilderness classification until after the leases expire.

The staff also decided that floatplane use on First and Pine lakes, which will continue indefinitely, forbade a Wilderness designation. “The presence of floatplanes landing and taking off would detract from the sense of wilderness,” Kathy Regan, a senior natural-resource planner, told the APA board during its three-day meeting.

For the same reasons, the agency decided against designating the Essex Chain a Canoe Area, which is essentially a Wilderness Area for paddlers.

The towns and pilots must obtain permits from DEC to land on First and Pine lakes. DEC Regional Director Bob Stegemann, who sits on the APA board, told the Adirondack Explorer that under the easements granted the towns, the department can regulate but cannot prevent floatplane use on the two lakes.

But John Caffry, a lawyer for Protect the Adirondacks, disagrees. “Nothing in the easements obligates DEC to grant those permits,” he said. Moreover, he questioned whether the easements are enforceable.

In rejecting Wild Forest, the APA staff concluded that this classification would not adequately protect natural resources—especially marshes on the Essex Chain. There were concerns that motorboats would stir up sediments, damage aquatic vegetation, pollute the water, and bring in invasive species. The marshes provide nesting habitat, food, and cover for wildlife and spawning habitat for fish.

“The ecological significance of the Essex Chain Lakes requires a Wilderness-type management,” Regan told the board.

The DEC proposal attempted to address the environmental concerns by placing the Essex Chain in a Special Management Area within the Wild Forest classification. Special restrictions for the Special Management Area were to be written into the State Land Master Plan—including, presumably, a ban on motorboats.

The staff found that the proposal ran afoul of the master plan. “A Special Management Area may not be used as a substitute for classification or a classification category,” the FSEIS says. It adds that Special Management
Areas are created when DEC writes a management plan for a Forest Preserve unit, which is done after classification.

That left only one option: Primitive. Under the State Land Master Plan, a Primitive Area is managed largely as Wilderness even though certain nonconforming uses (such as floatplanes) prevent its classification as Wilderness.

After Regan’s presentation, APA Commissioner Dick Booth said he agreed with the Primitive classification. “While many people want to see that area Wilderness, this classification is closer to what the State Land Master Plan envisioned, because of the nonconforming uses,” he said.

Booth, who is one of the board’s staunchest defenders of the Forest Preserve, had earlier written a legal memo concluding that a Wild Forest classification would violate the master plan.

**A modified proposal**

The recommendation contained in the FSEIS and accepted by the board differs in several respects from the Primitive option presented at public hearings. The reasons for the changes were not addressed at the agency’s meeting, but APA spokesman Keith McKeever said they were made to improve public access, accommodate more types of recreation, and to provide “connectivity” among towns in the region.

First and foremost, the modified option supports the creation of the snowmobile trail between Indian Lake and Newcomb, the most controversial aspect of the APA plan.

In addition, both the Essex Chain Primitive Area and the Hudson Gorge Wilderness shrank in the modified proposal.

The original proposal called for an 11,743-acre Essex Chain Primitive Area, nearly two thousand acres larger than what was approved. The main difference is that the land north of the Essex Chain will be Wild Forest, enabling people to drive fairly close to the Essex Chain and Hudson River. Under the original option, visitors would have had to hike or portage at least a few miles to reach the waterways.

The Hudson Gorge Wilderness was reduced from 32,234 acres to 23,494 acres. Originally, the Wilderness Area extended farther north along the Hudson, but the APA opted to draw the boundary at the Polaris Bridge, an iron structure that spans the river at the Blackwell Stillwater. The bridge will be in Wild Forest. If it were left in the Wilderness Area, it likely would have to be removed. If the bridge stays, it may be possible to create a snowmobile trail that crosses the Hudson and continues to Minerva—a high priority of the local towns.
Lastly, the APA agreed in the modified proposal to consider amending the State Land Master Plan to allow mountain biking on old logging roads in the Essex Chain Primitive Area. Generally, biking is not permitted in Primitive Areas.

Local officials lobbied for all these changes. Nevertheless, the final plan resembles in significant ways the “Wilderness with access” proposal favored by environmentalists. Under both, motorboats are banned from all water bodies and floatplanes are banned everywhere except First Lake and Pine Lake. And both allow hikers and paddlers to drive most of the way—but not all the way—to the Essex Chain and Hudson River.

**Unfinished business**

When the APA unveiled its recommendation, less than a week before the agency’s meeting, the Adirondack Council and Adirondack Mountain Club issued a joint news release in support of it despite their objections to the snowmobile corridor. Protect the Adirondacks and Adirondack Wild were more critical in their remarks.

“The APA and DEC appear to have compromised their mission by facilitating snowmobiles between the Hudson River and the Chain of Lakes all the way to the Cedar River,” Dan Plumley and Dave Gibson, partners in Adirondack Wild, wrote in a letter to the APA.

The environmental groups point out that the new trail would run through the heart of the Essex Chain Tract even though DEC policy discourages putting
snowmobile trails in the interior of the Forest Preserve. The department maintains that the policy is merely guidance, not law.

The critics question the need for the trail. Just a few years ago the state established a snowmobile trail between Newcomb and Indian Lake that runs along the west boundary of the Essex Chain Tract. Peter Bauer, the head of Protect, said a trail through the tract itself would be duplicative. “It is not linking any new communities together. It’s just providing new riding opportunities,” he said.

The snowmobile trail also raises several legal issues that must be resolved before it can be built. At one point, the trail would cross the Cedar River, which has been designated a Scenic River in the state’s Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers System. DEC would need to build a hundred-foot bridge to accommodate the trail.

It’s uncertain whether DEC regulations allow the construction of a bridge over the Cedar. However, the department has agreed to change its regulations, if necessary. “Clearly the department is on board to make this happen,” Stegemann said during the APA meeting.

In addition, the APA intends to revise the State Land Master Plan to permit the use of non-natural materials in the bridge. Given the length of the bridge, this is considered necessary to make the crossing safe.

Another issue is that the trail would pass within a half-mile of the Hudson where the river is designated a Wild River. Normally, motorized use is forbidden in a Wild River corridor. Because this part of the route is on a gravel road, DEC might contend that motorized use is a pre-existing use exempted from the regulation.

In case the legal hurdles prove insurmountable, the APA has designated an alternative snowmobile route that would stay north of the Cedar and head west to join the trail created a few years ago. If this route is chosen, the Essex Chain Primitive Area will be split in two, and the southern portion will be renamed the Pine Lake Primitive Area.

But the alternative route has problems of its own. For starters, it would run close to the Cedar for some distance, and motorized use is generally prohibited within a Scenic River corridor. It also would require cutting a swath through forest and perhaps wetlands. Finally, critics say it would be several miles longer than the existing Newcomb-Indian Lake trail, undercutting the rationale for a second trail.

ADK Executive Director Neil Woodworth said he could go along with the preferred route, if the legal questions are answered, but he would oppose the alternative. “Too much cutting, too many wetlands, and they still have to
get an amendment,” he said.

**Polaris Bridge**

Local leaders say the new snowmobile trail would serve two purposes. First, it would provide a more scenic route from Indian Lake to Newcomb. Second, it could someday be part of a route connecting these towns to Minerva.

*The Polaris Bridge over the Hudson River. Photo © Lynda McIntyre*

Under this scenario, snowmobilers could ride south from Newcomb or north from Indian Lake and then head east, crossing the Hudson on the Polaris Bridge and continuing on a yet-to-be-built trail through the Vanderwhacker Wild Forest.

Environmentalists, however, object to cutting a snowmobile trail through the middle of the Vanderwhacker tract. Woodworth said the trail should be built closer to Route 28N in Newcomb and perhaps make use of a rail corridor.

Without the trail, the environmentalists say, there will be no need for the bridge after the Polaris Club removes its camps. Finch, Pruyn built the bridge in the 1990s to access timber on the east side of the river. Adirondack Wild’s Dave Gibson said it was meant to be temporary and should be removed. “Finch constructed this bridge to allow for easy de-construction. It should go, no question about it,” he said.

Fred Monroe, executive director of the Local Government Review Board, which has a non-voting seat on the APA board, argues that since the bridge is a pre-existing structure, it can remain under the Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers rules.

Monroe said the bridges over the Cedar and the Hudson stand to benefit not
only snowmobilers, but also mountain bikers, hikers, cross-country skiers, equestrians, anglers, and hunters. Without the bridges the rivers pose an obstacle to cross-country travel, dividing the Essex Chain Tract into three sectors.

Bill Farber, chairman of the Hamilton County Board of Supervisors, envisions a day when mountain bikers will be able to ride on wooded trails from Indian Lake to Minerva to Newcomb and back to Indian Lake. In fact, he wants to see mountain-bike trails connect communities throughout the Park, making it possible to ride from one town to the next on multiday trips.

“The Polaris Bridge has to stay there, not just for snowmobiling,” Farber said. “Bridges create the ability to connect communities and trail systems.”

Public access

Last year, DEC established two interim parking areas on the Essex Chain Tract and one on the Indian River Tract to provide access to the newly acquired lands. All three can stay in place under the APA classification scheme, but Monroe said he’d like to see one of them moved for the convenience of Hudson paddlers.

As it stands now, paddlers must carry about three-quarters of a mile to a put-in on the Blackwell Stillwater near the Polaris Bridge (it’s also used as takeout for whitewater paddlers coming from the north). Monroe said the parking area could be moved to within a quarter-mile of the river.

Monroe also suggests creating a parking area on the south side of the Cedar River near the site of the proposed bridge. This would enable paddlers to carry their canoes to the Cedar. It also would serve as a trailhead for hikes to the Essex Chain from the south.

To get to the parking area, visitors would drive along the gravel road that state officials hope will become a snowmobile trail. That road is now closed to automobiles, and Woodworth said he is against opening it. “That route is only for snowmobile use,” he said. “That is what we were promised by DEC and the Park Agency.”

Stegemann said DEC will make decisions about where to locate parking areas and which roads to open to vehicular traffic when it writes management plans for the new Forest Preserve tracts. The department also is looking at establishing a trail to OK Slip Falls.

Something for everyone

Adirondack Park Agency board praised the staff’s proposal as a model of compromise. Neither environmentalists nor the local towns got everything they wanted, but everybody got something.
What the towns got • Snowmobile trail between Indian Lake and Newcomb, if legally permissible. • Retention of Polaris Bridge over the Hudson. • Floatplanes on First Lake and Pine Lake. • Possibility of mountain biking in Essex Chain Primitive Area.

What environmentalists got • The 23,494-acre Hudson Gorge Wilderness Area. • No motorboats on the 18 lakes in Essex Chain Primitive Area. • No floatplanes on Third Lake, the biggest lake in the Essex Chain. • Motor-less buffer north of Essex Chain.