The Adirondack Park Agency’s State Land Committee voted unanimously today to allow NYCO Minerals to conduct exploratory drilling in the Jay Mountain Wilderness on a parcel known as Lot 8.

Dick Booth, the chairman of the committee, acknowledged that some green activists oppose the test drilling on legal and environmental grounds.

“This may well get litigated, but that’s not a surprise,” Booth said before the vote.

The committee voted to amend the Jay Mountain Wilderness management plan to allow the drilling. The full APA board is expected to approve the same amendment on Friday.

In November, the public voted to amend Article 14 of the state constitution to permit the state to give Lot 8 to NYCO in exchange for lands of equal or greater value. Before the swap occurs, however, NYCO wants to conduct test drills to ascertain the amount of wollastonite below the surface.

Ordinarily, the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan would bar such industrial activity in a Wilderness Area, but APA lawyer James Townsend told the committee that the constitutional amendment “overrides inconsistent
provisions” of the master plan.

Earthjustice, which represents several environmental groups, maintains that the APA must amend the master plan, conduct a survey of Lot 8’s natural resources, and follow a number of other environmental laws before allowing the drilling to take place.

“The inadequate description of existing conditions and impacts, lack of scientifically supported analysis, internal inconsistencies, and failure to provide adequate protection and mitigation all suggest an unnecessarily rushed and ill-considered process. The Forest Preserve and public deserve better,” said Earthjustice attorney Debora Goldberg in a May 30 letter to the APA and state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Peter Bauer of Protect the Adirondacks and David Gibson of Adirondack Wild, whose organizations are among those represented by Earthjustice, said they were not surprised by today’s vote.

“We expected it,” Bauer said. “The debate was not very vigorous.”

He and Gibson said they did not know if their organizations would sue the APA to block the drilling.

NYCO hopes to begin drilling this year and finish by next spring.

If it finds sufficient reserves of wollastonite—a mineral used in plastics and ceramics—NYCO plans to give the state about 1,500 acres in exchange for Lot 8, which is 200 acres.

If NYCO decides not to mine Lot 8, it would be required to restore the area disturbed by the drilling and to give the state a parcel of land equal or greater in size to the disturbed area. DEC says only about 7.5 acres of Lot 8 would be disturbed.