The state Department of Environmental Conservation has withdrawn a draft management plan for new state lands known as the Essex Chain Lakes Complex in the face of criticism that it failed to discuss the route of a controversial snowmobile trail.

The decision to address the snowmobile issue in a new draft plan won praise from both environmental activists and snowmobile enthusiasts.

“It’s important that all the issues of the Essex Chain are dealt with at one time, so the public has an opportunity to debate them all,” said Neil Woodworth, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

Last December, the Adirondack Park Agency voted in favor of establishing a snowmobile trail in the Essex Chain region, but it left the exact route up in the air, owing to legal and environmental questions. Under the preferred option, the route would head south from

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Photos by Nancie Battaglia

The Essex Chain Lakes has become a destination for paddlers.

Loons are part of the scenery on Third Lake.
Newcomb, cross the Cedar River on a new bridge, and continue south to Indian Lake on a logging road. Under an alternative scenario, the trail would turn west at the Cedar and eventually join another snowmobile trail on the western boundary of the complex.

When DEC issued a draft management plan in June, the department said it would make a decision on the snowmobile trail sometime in the future—even though it was proposing to build an equestrian bridge over the Cedar that would have been sturdy enough to accommodate snowmobiles. At the time, critics felt the department was not being upfront about its plans.

"DEC is being devious. This is a classic bait-and-switch," said Peter Bauer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, which opposes allowing snowmobiles into the area.

Fred Monroe, executive director of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, also said he thought DEC was disingenuous. "It's better to be straightforward and see who salutes and who takes potshots," said Monroe, a snowmobiling proponent.

In early August, DEC announced that it would withdraw the draft plan "to fully assess the options for locating a snowmobile trail." The department expects to issue a revised draft plan in late fall, perhaps in November.

Environmentalists and state officials agree that routing the trail over the Cedar River would be the less environmentally intrusive option. That's because the trail would follow existing logging roads. However, this option raises several legal issues relating to the state Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers Act:

- It would necessitate building a bridge over the river. The Cedar is classified as a Scenic River, and DEC regulations forbid the construction of a bridge for motorized use over a Scenic River.
- Part of the snowmobile route would lie within the river corridor, and DEC regulations forbid the operation of motor vehicles within a Scenic River corridor.
- South of the Cedar, part of the snowmobile route would lie within the corridor of the Hudson River, which is there classified as Wild. The rivers act does not allow motorized use within a Wild River corridor.

Woodworth, who is a lawyer, contends that DEC will have to either amend the rivers act and its regulations or make the claim that the bridge and motor vehicles are permitted by virtue of public use that predated the rivers act. In its original draft management plan, DEC made such a claim for the logging road south of the Cedar to justify its decision to allow visitors to drive up the road as far as the Outer Gooley Club, an abandoned hunting lodge. Woodworth is skeptical of this claim. When the land was owned by the Finch, Pruyn & Company paper company...

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Some work is done

Although the state Department of Environmental Conservation has yet to adopt a management plan for the Essex Chain Lakes Complex, it has completed a number of projects in the region.

**Camping:** The department has designated thirteen tent sites on the Essex Chain and two nearby ponds. Free permits for these waterfront sites must be obtained from the Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb. DEC has designated a number of other tent sites in the region; these do not require a permit. Camping in the Essex Chain Lakes Primitive Area and the Pine Lake Primitive Area is allowed only on designated sites.

**Canoe carries:** The department has marked canoe carries from Deer Pond to Third Lake, from Second Lake to First Lake, and from First Lake to Grassy Pond.

**Parking:** Parking areas have been established near Deer Pond, near the Outer Gooley Club, and near the Blackwell Stillwater on the Hudson River. The department also has created a parking area for horse trailers on North Chain Lakes Road.

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We wanted to establish the ground rules so we can protect a very special place.”

- Joe Martens, DEC commissioner

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“Overall the people who hunt and fish don’t think there are enough roads open.”

- Walt Paul, New York State Conservation Council

access” will detract from the wildness of the lakes. “It violates the spirit of a motorless Essex Chain,” Bauer remarked.

Interim campsites

Bauer and David Gibson of A di ron dack Wild criticized DEC for creating campsites on the Essex Chain before soliciting public input and adopting a management plan. One fear is that the sites will turn out to be less than ideal. Bauer said it would have been smarter to manage the Essex Chain as a day-use area for the time being. “They’re rushing the process, and we don’t see why,” he said.

The department created the campsites under an interim recreation plan, which it says was designed to preserve natural resources while allowing public access. “We wanted to establish the ground rules so we can protect a very special place,” M artsens said.

Motorized access for hunters

During big-game season, DEC would allow hunters to drive deeper into the tract on two roads than would be permitted in other times of the year. The idea is to make it easier for them to reach hunting grounds and remove carcasses.

Woodworth feels this detracts from the wild character of the area. “We bargained hard for a Primitive Area that is to be managed as Wilderness,” he said. (Motor vehicles are not allowed in Wilderness Areas and are generally prohibited in Primitive Areas.)

Walt Paul, a land-use specialist for the New York State Conservation Council, takes the opposite point of view. “Overall the people who hunt and fish just don’t think there are enough roads open,” he said. “We were hoping for more to be open seasonally.”

Paul also complained about DEC’s ban on campfires in the Essex Chain Primitive Area. Not only are campfires a cherished part of the outdoors experience, he said, “those fires help to keep the bugs away.”

State opens OK Slip trail

The state has opened a three-mile hiking trail to OK Slip Falls in the recently established Hudson Gorge Wilderness.

The trail starts on the north side of Route 28, at the same trailhead for a pre-existing trail that leads to Ross, Whortleberry, and Big Bad Luck ponds. The parking area is on the south side of the highway, about 7.5 miles east of the hamlet of Indian Lake and a bit east of the trailhead.

Hikers should go up the Ross Pond trail for a half-mile, then turn right onto the new trail. OK Slip Falls is reached 2.5 miles after the turn. The trail ends at an overlook with a view of the falls. OK Slip Brook flows into the Hudson Gorge.

The state acquired OK Slip Falls—one of the tallest cascades in the Adirondack Park—from the Nature Conservancy in 2013.