



Adirondack Wild to NYS: Stop the Rush to Accommodate Overuse of the High Peaks Wilderness and Boreas Ponds

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Newcomb, NY - At public meetings held in Albany and Newcomb this week, the non-profit advocate *Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve* told the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and NYS Adirondack Park Agency (APA) that the agencies are rushing to approve complex amendments to management plans for the High Peaks Wilderness and nearby Forest Preserve units. Such haste risks exposing these wilderness landscapes to more overuse and degradation of their natural resources and wild character.

The agencies are on course to approve the amendments in just over 45 days, or half the time that the agencies previously agreed should be taken to consider complex unit management plans for “forever wild” state lands.

A third public meeting to discuss the amendments has been scheduled for June 21 in Lake Placid. While that is appreciated, the organization finds the number of public meetings inadequate and is pushing for additional public comment opportunities. “These lands are owned by all New Yorkers,” said Adirondack Wild’s David Gibson. “More people should be asked whether the priority of these amendments is to protect natural resources and wild character, which is the correct priority, or is more heavily weighted to accommodate recreational uses that exceed the land’s capacity.”

“This Memorial Day weekend marks the start of the heavily visited Adirondack summer season. Recreational pressures and overuse that have plagued the eastern High Peaks in the past few years must not be simply transferred to the vulnerable, ecologically rich Boreas Ponds that have just been added to that Wilderness,” stated Adirondack Wild’s Dan Plumley. “Public comment opportunities should also be scheduled in western and central New York, and downstate,” he added.

To accelerate adoption of the amendments, the agencies this month adopted concurrent public comment ending on June 27. This despite past promises that for controversial unit management plans like these the agencies would abide by their agreement to hold separate public comment periods consistent with their different roles and responsibilities. The APA is responsible for deciding whether State Land management plans are consistent with guidelines

in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, or SLMP. The DEC is responsible for day to day management and administration of state lands.

The amendments are particularly complex because they involve the integration and SLMP-compliant management of about 40,000 new acres just added to the High Peaks Wilderness, most prominently at Boreas Ponds and the McIntyre tracts. The result creates a vast, ecologically diverse 250,000 acre “forever wild” wilderness that includes majestic High Peaks, wild rivers like the Opalescent and the ecologically vulnerable Boreas Ponds.

The growth in High Peaks hiking and trail-use has been skyrocketing. Trail registers show that the number of hikers at Cascade Mountain has doubled in ten years, from 16,091 in 2006 to 33,149 in 2015. In 2015, 53,423 people signed the trail register of the Van Hoevenberg Trail near Adirondack Loj, an increase of 62 percent since 2005. According to the Adirondack Mountain Club website, in 1990 Summit Stewards in the High Peaks spoke with 7,000 hikers. Over the last two years, they have spoken with 31,000-36,000 hikers.



Hikers on Cascade Mountain, eastern High Peaks Wilderness – photo by Dan Plumley

“Hiker overuse has severely impacted wilderness resources and experience in the Eastern High Peaks for years,” said Dan Plumley. “We don’t want the same overuse to happen at Boreas Ponds. We’re calling for implementation of carrying capacity studies to inform both indirect and direct control techniques in order to protect the resource from over-use impacts.” Such studies are used throughout the national wilderness system to safeguard wild areas from human overuse, and to employ the tools necessary to manage users so that their activities do not degrade natural systems or wilderness values.

Along with the overuse has come soil erosion, crowding on sensitive summits and an increasing search and rescue challenge in the mountains. “In these amendments, the DEC and APA are obligated to strengthen, not weaken the 1999 High Peaks unit management plan, and to practice wilderness management for both the High Peaks and the new Boreas Ponds addition,” added Dan Plumley. “Had these management recommendations been funded and implemented consistently since 1999, we might not be seeing the serious overuse that is plaguing the eastern High Peaks now.”

Adirondack Wild is in the process of developing additional management recommendations for both the DEC and APA, and will be asking the agencies to do much more to avoid and mitigate overuse impacts. *Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve* is a not-for-profit, membership organization which acts on behalf of wilderness and wild land values and stewardship throughout the region. More on the web: www.adirondackwild.org.