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Snowmobile plan provokes lawsuit

Paul Post, Special to The Record

ALBANY— An environmental group has filed suit against three state agencies, charging that a new snowmobile trail plan threatens the Adirondacks' forever-wild character.

The suit, filed by the Adirondack Council in state Supreme Court in Albany, charges that the state Department of Environmental Conservation, state parks and Adirondack Park Agency approved plans that violate state law.

One of the group's main contentions is that new trails could be built deep in the woods, where they would cause greater harm, instead of close to existing roadways. The suit seeks to block plans from being implemented until such issues are resolved.

"Current law requires that trails be no wider than eight feet and requires that they retain the character of a foot trail," said Brian Houseal, the council's executive director. "It requires new trails, especially those connecting communities, to be adjacent to current roads and at the edges, or periphery, of large areas of forest preserve. But then the plan defines 'periphery' as up to two miles away from a roadway or the boundary of the Forest Preserve. That definition is so broad as to make it meaningless."

The APA approved the new snowmobile plan on Nov. 13 at the DEC's request. DEC plans to close some trails and replace them with new ones. The main goal is to provide connectors between communities to boost the local winter-time economy.

Dave Perkins of Hudson Falls is head of the New York State Snowmobile Association, representing 230 clubs with 70,000 riders. "In some places the terrain doesn't allow you to put trails next to highways," he said. "In some cases it isn't possible. They (DEC) really need some flexibility."

"In some cases, a rock may have to be moved and in other cases shifting the trail can easily allow it to safely pass a collection of rocks that would likely pose a safety hazard," he said. "Trails in the forest preserve maintain their wild appearance by maintaining the overhead canopy of trees. The only trees that would be cut outside the trail width are those deemed to pose a safety hazard due to the tree either being dead or dying. There are hiking trails in the Adirondacks that are much wider than any snowmobile trail."

Houseal criticized several other points in the new snowmobile plan, such as widening foot trails by up to 50 percent to accommodate snowmobiles. "It authorizes the illegal use of tracked grooming vehicles," he said. "It allows the construction of new trails almost anywhere on public wild forest lands. None of these changes can be made without amending the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, which these agencies didn't bother to do."

On several occasions the environmental groups were invited to hike into the forest preserve to see the work envisioned by the guidelines.

Dan Plumley of Protect the Adirondacks was the only one from the three environmental groups to make a field visit.”

However, Perkins said new laws would make snowmobiling safer.

“I was able to be part of field work with DEC and APA staff this past summer,” he said. “It was during these field trips that both state agencies were able to see the value of tracked grooming and how it makes trails such as those in the forest preserve safer.