

# Environmental groups fight hunting cabin plan

By MIKE LYNCH - Outdoors Writer ([mlynch@adironackdailyenterprise.com](mailto:mlynch@adironackdailyenterprise.com))  
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Four New York conservation organizations say the state Department of Environmental Conservation didn't follow proper procedures when it renegotiated three conservation easements that were part of the 139,000-acre deal with Champion International Paper in 1999.

The original \$25 million purchase in Franklin, Lewis, Herkimer and St. Lawrence counties included the removal of 208 hunting cabins by 2014. Since that purchase, the DEC has modified the agreement with the current landowner, Heartwood Forestland Fund, allowing those hunting cabins to remain and 12 more to be built. In return, the state would receive a 2,100-acre tract of what is now easement land near the Deer River Flow. That land would added to the Forest Preserve.

In a joint press release Tuesday, the conservation groups of Protect the Adirondacks, Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, Atlantic States Legal Foundation and the Sierra Club say modifying the deal violates state Environmental Conservation Law and is contrary to state constitutional requirements. They also said the state is giving away property for less than its true value.

They are asking Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli and Attorney General Eric Schneiderman to not give final approval of the deal. The groups say they presented their concerns to these officials in a series of letters in late 2011 and early 2012.

"The process that they are using for modifying the agreements is simply by a mutual agreement, so that doesn't really protect the public interest," said Charles Morrison of the Sierra Club. "If Heartwood Forestland Fund and DEC agree between them on this without any standards, it really doesn't protect the public interest."

Morrison is the former director of natural resources planning at DEC. He said the DEC should have held a public hearing on the modifications, a concern voiced in the past by at least one conservation group.

"In this case, the public has already paid for these easements back in 1999, and so to change them, it's quite a different thing than acquiring new easements," he said. "Going back and changing something that the public has already paid for is really an issue."

When asked if the groups plan to file a lawsuit, Morrison said that is still to be determined and that the groups are waiting on a response from state officials before making any further decisions.

The DEC began a dialogue in 2006 with Heartwood Forestland Fund, which acquired the Champion lands, about modifying the easement deal to allow the camps to remain.

In November 2009, DEC held a 30-day public comment period on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the conservation easement modifications, but no public hearing was held. Last September, DEC completed a final EIS for the project.

In April 2011, the state Adirondack Park Agency approved a subdivision permit for the property, letting the hunting camps remain.

"The purpose of the 1999 agreements, including the provision to remove the cabins, is to improve water quality, enhance wildlife habitat and provide for public recreation (such as public hunting)," David Gibson, of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve, said in a prepared statement. "Retaining the cabins will negate these benefits. Also, DEC's reasons for retaining the cabins are flimsy compared with the benefits that will accrue by removing them."

The DEC could not be immediately reached for this report.