

It's a trade: land for cabins

DEC to let 220 hunting cabins stay; state gets 2,797 acres of land in exchange

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The state Department of Environmental Conservation will let up to 220 hunting cabins remain on former Champion International Paper lands, it announced Friday.

In exchange for letting the cabins stay on the conservation easement lands, the state will get 2,797 acres of land. The DEC announced Friday that it had finalized this deal with Heartwood Forestland Fund III LP, which now owns the former Champion lands in the northern Adirondacks between Paul Smiths and St. Regis Falls.

The camps, which are on 1-acre lots, are located in Franklin, Herkimer, Lewis and St. Lawrence counties. They had originally been slated for removal as of 2014, under the terms of the original 1999 agreement with Champion International Paper.

"Today's agreement recognizes the importance hunt clubs play in the day-to-day management of these lands and in ensuring the long-standing traditions of hunting, fishing, camping and hiking will continue," DEC Commissioner Joe Martens said in a written statement.

Under the new terms of the agreement, Heartwood Forestland will retain the right to permanently lease no more than 220 camp sites located on the 110,000 acres of forest lands, on which the state acquired a working forest easement in 1999. In return, the company will transfer the 2,797 acres of land to the state in two parcels next to the state's existing Deer River holdings.

A 2,146-acre parcel, all within the Adirondack Park boundary, will be added to the Adirondack Forest Preserve as part of the recently classified Deer River Primitive Area, and a 651-acre parcel outside the Park will become a new state forest. These parcels will provide access to a previously inaccessible, detached Forest Preserve property and will be open to the public for hunting, fishing, camping, hiking and other outdoor recreation.

The entire 139,000-acre property that was part of the original deal will be open to public hunting, except for the 1-acre camp parcels.

"It's a great day, and I'm sure a relief for families with camps on the former Champion lands to finally have some resolution to this situation after 12 years of hard work by many, many people," the New York State Conservation Council's access and land use specialist, Walt Paul, said in a written statement. "The sporting community recognizes and truly appreciates the hard work and persistence on the part of DEC staff to bring this to closure."

"We are pleased this project is now complete as it aligns the Champion easement with the other conservation easements in the Adirondack Park," Charles H. Collins, managing director of the Forestland Group LLC which manages Heartwood Forestland, said in a written statement.

Procedures followed?

While many groups applauded the amendment, several environmental groups came out in opposition to it in January because they said the DEC didn't follow proper procedures when it renegotiated the deal, and because they said there isn't a proper procedure in place for amending conservation easements.

"We want a process in place with clear standards," said Dave Gibson of Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

Adirondack Wild was joined in this advocacy effort by Protect the Adirondacks, the Atlantic States Legal Foundation and the Sierra Club, which said 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 and that a proper public comment period wasn't held for the amendment.

Gibson said his argument is "not about hunters, not about lease holders. It's about the Department of (Environmental) Conservation convening public hearings and getting regulations so the public knows what the standards are for changing an easement."

Gibson said the pressure this coalition put on the DEC has resulted in the department drafting regulations to amend conservation easements. The Enterprise couldn't confirm whether Gibson's claim was true, but the DEC did confirm it is now working on its amendment process.

"DEC is currently in the process of drafting a regulation to provide standards, criteria and process to follow when amending a DEC conservation easement," department spokeswoman Lori Severino wrote the Enterprise in an email.

One thing the DEC has rebutted in the past is that this amendment process did not give the public proper time to comment in the past, one of the conservation groups' main arguments. Friday's press release on this new deal noted that the agreement was publicly noticed in the Nov. 4, 2009, Environmental Notice Bulletin and included a 48-day public comment period.

It also stated that the agreement was also approved by the state Adirondack Park Agency after a public comment period, along with the offices of the attorney general and the state comptroller.

A full environmental impact statement and responsiveness summary was also prepared for the agreement.