

Mixed reaction to state land purchase

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Gov. Andrew Cuomo's announcement on Sunday that the state would proceed with the purchase of 69,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn and Co. land in the central Adirondacks has drawn praise from environmentalists and criticism from the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board.

"The towns and the snowmobiling community really got what their part of this wonderful deal was up front," said Adirondack Mountain Club Executive Director Neil Woodworth. "I thought it was unfair that some of them turned against the deal and wanted to scuttle what the general public was getting out of the deal, in terms of the Essex Chain of Lakes, the Boreas Ponds area, the approaches to the southern High Peaks, the Hudson Gorge. We lobbied hard against that pressure and got our members involved, so the governor's reaffirmance that the state will proceed with every acre of the fee purchase of this deal is great news for us."

In June 2007, The Nature Conservancy bought 161,000 acres of timberland in the Adirondacks from the Finch, Pruyn and Co. timber company for \$110 million. Then in 2009, it sold 92,000 of the acres to ATP Timberland Invest, a Danish pension fund, for \$32.8 million, with conservation easements to prevent development. At the end of 2010, the nonprofit group sold the conservation rights on all but 3,000 acres of that acreage to the state for \$30 million.

The Conservancy has also sold small parcels of the former Finch land to several Adirondack towns. The 69,000 acres it is selling to the state for the Forest Preserve is considered the last piece of this complex land deal.

Throughout the process, the most vocal opponent of the deal has been Fred Monroe, chairman of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board. On Monday, he said he was disappointed with the deal and that people will be "out of work" as a result of the purchase.

"I think it's very disappointing for local government and residents and anyone who depends on the forest industry for their livelihood," Monroe said. "It's very sad for residents and workers in the Adirondacks.

"It's particularly disappointing because there were alternatives," he added. "They could buy in fee the most sensitive parts and leave the working-forest parts with a conservation easement."

But DEC Commissioner Joe Martens defended the acquisition and said the original 161,000 acres of land was looked at to determine which land is suitable for logging. He noted that the state put a conservation easement on 89,000 acres of timberland already.

"When we looked at the entire suite of parcels and the overall 161,000 acres, we did exactly what the critics said should be done," Martens said. "We looked at the most productive timberlands and the best timberlands and kept them, and acquired an easement on those lands so they would be kept in production. And we looked at these parcels and we determined that these were the ones that had the highest recreational value, the highest public values or the most sensitive resources, and that these should be set aside for the Forest Preserve, so it was a very careful balancing act based on the attributes of the land itself, which we think is a very intelligent way to approach a big project like this."

Monroe was also concerned some lands will be classified wilderness and not be accessible to motorized vehicles. Plus, some 200 hunting camps will have to be removed from the lands. Monroe, who belongs to a hunting club that owns one of those camps, said that will be a "blow to the economy.

"It's going to be devastating for those people; it's destruction of a culture," he said. "They've gone there all their lives, and now they're not able-bodied enough to walk in or canoe in."

State Sen. Betty Little, a vocal opponent of the state buying more land in the Adirondack Park, was less critical of the deal. She noted it was the completion of a commitment made to The Nature Conservancy by a prior governor's administration.

"The one thing that I think will happen is that there will be better accessibility to these lands," she said.

Unlike Monroe, Little said she is confident the governor and DEC will stay true to their word and make sure the lands are accessible. She

also said the price the state will pay is "pretty close" to what The Nature Conservancy paid when it bought the lands from Finch, Pruyn in 2007.

"There will be plenty of opportunities for public discussion going forward on the unit management plans," Little said.

Little said she would have preferred to see about 20,000 or 30,000 acres of the land remain in conservation easements to allow for more working forests and to let the hunting camps remain.

"But there are some beautiful lands in there - like OK Slip Falls," she said. "Some of those, I agree, need to be protected in fee title."

Dan Plumley of Adirondack Wild said in a press release that his relatively new environmental group's members have wanted the lands to be protected for a long time.

"These lands represent the very heart of our wild park," he said. "We have urged that they should become Forest Preserve since the 1980s. In fact, our founder Paul Schaefer began to advocate for long-term protection of OK Slip Falls and other parts of Finch, Pruyn's lands fifty years ago."

North Elba town Supervisor Roby Politi said the acquisition makes sense because he thinks it will benefit local economies.

"Mike Carr from The Nature Conservancy should take the credit for structuring that deal in such a way that those local communities benefitted from snowmobile trails and hiking trails and so forth that will bring more tourists and economics to the area," Politi said.

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