

# Green groups chop at APA clear-cutting proposal

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RAY BROOK - The state Adirondack Park Agency is facing criticism from a chorus of environmental groups over its plan to streamline the review process for certain kinds of clear-cutting.

Protect the Adirondacks claims the proposal would "likely lead to new era of clear-cutting in the Adirondack Park" while the Adirondack Council said it's possible that "hundreds, or even thousands, of acres could be cut bare without public notice or participation."

APA officials counter that the proposed general permit will improve the health of the Park's forests.

"This general permit absolutely does not open the forest for clear-cutting," agency spokesman Keith McKeever said in a prepared statement. "It will work to stop the practice of cutting right up to the APA jurisdictional threshold by incentivizing landowners to use sustainable forest management treatments."

Under current APA rules, any clear-cut of more than 25 acres is a Class A regional project that requires an agency permit and must go through a stringent review process. That process includes public notification and a final vote by the agency Board of Commissioners.

In late November, the agency announced plans to create a general permit that would simplify the review of clear-cutting proposals for landowners involved in forestry certification programs like those run by the Forest Stewardship Council and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative. It would also apply to lands under conservation easements with stewardship requirements. The proposal would eliminate the public notice requirements, shorten the time frame for approval and allow agency staff to issue permits without a vote by the APA board.

In documents supporting the draft general permit, APA officials say their current rules have led to a high number of 24-acre clear-cuts in the Park and instances of what's called high-grading, where only trees of high value are removed, resulting in "dominance by undesirable species, reduction in biodiversity and unhealthy forest conditions."

"This general permit was prepared to encourage sustainable forestry practices and good silviculture prescriptions, including shelterwood cuts (in which mature trees are left standing to protect saplings), which will result in healthy working forests," the agency said in a press release announcing the proposal.

The proposal has drawn the support of the Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board.

"It will allow certified landowners to implement harvests that improve the health of the forests without the burden of applying for a permit, which in many times in the past has caused them to not implement those measures," Review Board Executive Director Fred Monroe said at the Thursday, Dec. 13 APA meeting.

However, Protect the Adirondacks argues that the Park Agency hasn't provided any real data to back up its claim that forest health will be improved by its plan.

"The decision to pursue the new general permit for clear-cutting was an anecdote-driven process and not a data-driven process," Protect Executive Director Peter Bauer said in a press release. "Good science and good data make good public policy. The APA has not come anywhere close to substantiating the need for these dramatic changes to loosen rules for clear-cutting in the Adirondack Park."

Bauer is also concerned that if more timber companies engage in large-scale clear-cuts on conservation easement lands, it will weaken public support for land protection through conservation easements.

Diane Fish, executive director of the Adirondack Council, said there are no restrictions on how many acres could be clear-cut under a fast-track permit, and the permits would never expire.

"Frankly, we are not persuaded that anyone really needs this expedited, general permit," Fish said in a press release. "Over the past 20 years, timber companies have only requested permission for major clear-cuts from the park agency three times. All three permits were granted. All three resulted in numerous public complaints about abuse of the forest. People get mad about smaller ones too, much smaller than 25 acres."

A vote is expected at the APA board meeting in January, but Dan Plumley of Adirondack Wild said the agency should at least postpone a decision. Speaking at Thursday's agency meeting, Plumley encouraged the board to involve stakeholders, including environmental groups and

the logging industry, in the process before taking a vote.

"We would urge a three-to-six-month study period before you vote on a general permit for clear-cutting so your actions are transparent and the public has the opportunity to understand the ramifications of a decision that would remove Class A review from this table to your staff," Plumley said. "January is too soon, and frankly, we believe you're not ready to appreciate the intricacies of forest certification to pass over authority to your staff."

The agency is accepted public comments on the proposal up to Dec. 28.