

Is Drilling Compatible with State Forest Management?

“No”, say Southern Tier forest users at April 14 meeting

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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More than 100 people filed into the Candor High School auditorium last Thursday to tell NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) what they thought about the draft Rapid Waters Unit Management Plan (UMP). Nearly everyone who commented hammered home the point that drilling for gas is not compatible with the other goals outlined in the management plan.

The April 14 meeting focused on DEC's 20-year plan for a 12,600 acre-unit that includes the Danby State Forest and Shindagin Hollow State Forest. The management plan seeks to address both short- and long-term land management needs, conserving forest ecosystems, wildlife habitat and recreational trails, while at the same time exploring opportunities for economic use.

John Clancy, senior DEC forester and team leader on the project, gave a quick overview of the plan highlights. There are four goals, he said. First is to provide healthy, sustainable and biologically diverse ecosystems. The long-term plan seeks to manage up to 58 percent of the unit as late successional habitat (mature forest) with the rest divided between early and mid-succession habitat.

DEC hopes to address forest fragmentation by connecting forest stands across the unit. Clancy also highlighted issues important to ecosystem management, noting the importance of protecting the core area of high canopy and the importance of streams and wetlands to plant and wildlife diversity.

The second goal cited in the plan is to provide forest-based recreational opportunities. Clancy pointed to the 47 miles of designated trails and lean-tos, noting the hunting, fishing and other recreational uses. Shindagin Hollow is popular among mountain-bikers, and DEC would like to add five miles to the existing trail system. ATV use will continue to be restricted to people holding mobility impairment permits.

DEC's third goal is to provide economic benefits to local communities and the state. The plan allocates about 57 percent of the Unit (7190 acres) for sustainable timber harvest. That's about 360 acres a year, Clancy said. DEC has designated an additional 2600 acres as natural and protected areas.

The plan also addresses potential oil and gas exploration and development. The draft plan would exclude drilling from areas that are too steep, and limit the number of well pads in areas of high canopy. DEC also established a 250-foot setback area that would "buffer" drilling areas from recreational trails and streams.

"With a minimum spacing of one well per 320 acres, there's potential for up to 39 wells," Clancy said. "At this point none of the Unit's forests have been leased."

Resident after resident got up to speak at the podium, repeating the same refrain: drilling for gas is inconsistent with managing the forests for ecological services and recreation.

“I urge DEC to revise the management plan to explicitly prohibit oil and gas leases,” said Russ Charif, who works at Cornell’s Laboratory of Ornithology. Drilling, he pointed out, will impair water quality, fragment the habitat, decrease species diversity and the increased noise will have an impact on breeding birds.

“Hydro-fracking is completely incompatible with other uses outlined in the plan,” concurred Danby resident Becca Harber. The 250-foot buffer will not isolate hikers from the noise of drilling activities, nor will it protect them from air pollution caused by the drilling. “Where will we be able to hike, fish, camp and escape industrialization?”

A couple of people addressed concerns with the forest management plan. Neighboring landowners already provide early- and mid-successional forests, one said. It would make more sense for DEC to allow the state forests to grow old. Another pointed out that “we don’t need more woodcock habitat.”

One man, a forester, complimented DEC on their forest management practices. Timber harvesting supports many families in the area, he said. It is a sustainable activity, he emphasized, one that is compatible with other forest uses such as hiking and mountain biking.

People wishing to submit comments to DEC may send them by mail to: NYSDEC, Division of Lands and Forests, Attn: John Clancy, 1285 Fisher Avenue, Cortland, N. Y., 13045-1090, or by e-mail to: jmclancy@gw.dec.state.ny.us. Written comments will be accepted until May 14.

The Rapid Waters Unit Management Plan is available on the DEC website at www.dec.ny.gov/lands/72384.html. A limited number of copies of the plan are available on compact disc. To request a copy, contact the DEC Cortland Lands and Forests office at 753-3095, ext. 217.