

Sparta Mountain backlash

Sierra Club, Sparta residents concerned about proposed forest cutting

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1



BY ERIKA NORTON

SPARTA — A plan proposed to diversify the forest and create young forest habitat within Sparta Mountain has caused backlash from not only residents living in and around the site, but from environmental groups questioning the methods and motives for the plan. “The plan is presented as a stewardship project, but in mine and many others’ opinion, it is anything other than stewardship --— it is really a logging plan,” said Susan Williams, the Sierra Club Skylands Group chair at a Sparta township council meeting. Proposed by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) and the New Jersey Audubon Society, the 87-page plan states the main goal of the project is “to maintain ecosystem health, diversity and integrity” by creating a “greater balance among the stages of forest succession” over the next 10 years. The plan, which would be the first stage in a larger management vision to be implemented over 60 years, would encompass over 3,400 acres of land within the townships of Sparta, Ogdensburg, and Hardyston in Sussex County and Jefferson Township in Morris County.

Groups against it

However, environmental groups, including the nation’s largest and oldest conservation group, the Sierra Club, feels the motives and techniques described in the plan are not in the best interest of the property. Ogdensburg Councilman Robert McGuire said at a meeting Feb. 8 that after going through the plan, it appears that beginning the eighth year, nearly 20 acres in Ogdensburg will be affected. He said that the Council was not notified regarding their plan, instead, resident Jean Castimore first brought the project to the council's attention. According to Ogdensburg Mayor Steve Ciasullo, the council is trying to gather information at this point and hasn't said whether they approve or oppose the plan. One concern the council does have, Ciasullo said, is with the possibility of runoff. “We're also in the midst of redoing our dam up in Heater’s Pond, and when the plans were drawn for

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2

the dam, we never discussed any open spaces of mountain where you could have potential runoff," he said, "So we're concerned that any added runoff into Heater's Pond could be a detriment to the new dam that we're putting in."The council has been in touch with the NJDEP and are hoping to hold a public meeting with residents. Williams, along with other concerned Sparta residents, presented her opposition to the plan to the Sparta Township Council on Feb. 9, citing the various forest management techniques proposed in the plan, such as "clearcutting" or logging, as being more harmful than helpful. According to Williams, the area's water quality and supply, which contributes to serving over five million New Jersey residents, would be adversely affected by this plan, as well as the recreational, cultural and scenic resources the area provides. "This is being presented as being necessary to save the Golden-winged warbler however, many groups have shown that this is ridiculous and futile," Williams said. "It is a trojan horse to let commercial loggers in, in our opinion."

Those in favor

On the other side of the argument, the New Jersey Audubon Society feels this plan will help in addressing the lack of young forest habitat available in New Jersey, by creating new habitat for numerous declining birds, including the endangered Golden-winged warbler, and other wildlife. According to John Cecil, vice president for stewardship of the NJ Audubon Society, the way the forest used to work is that the forest would be disturbed, gaps would be created, the wildlife that thrives in those types of habitat would take advantage of the gaps, therefore creating a balance in the context of forest succession and health. "There really is an opportunity to create new future forest and help numerous birds and wildlife recover, all while protecting water and aesthetic resources that we all cherish at Sparta Mountain," Cecil said at the township meeting. According to Cecil, since 2011, the New Jersey Audubon Society has already been actively partnering with the NJDEP Division of Fish and Wildlife to implement these types of forest stewardship plans in parts of the Sparta Mountain Management Area the Audubon Society and the state owns, but on a much smaller scale. Instead of creating about 10 to 12 acres of young forest habitat per year, this plan proposes to create roughly 20 to 30 acres of young forest habitat per year. Cecil also said at the meeting that the plan was developed according to forest stewardship certification standards, which have been endorsed or supported by the Sierra Club, the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, the Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resources and Defense Council, the National Wildlife Federation and

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3

other conservation groups. However, the Sierra Club feels the plan does not comply with other previous preservation area goals and rules, such as those laid out in the Highlands Water Protection and Planning Act of 2004 and the Highlands Regional Master Plan. “The goal of creating young forest habitat flies in the face of the area's original primary goal of preserving what remains of New Jersey’s large expanses of interior contiguous mature forests, which provides... habitat for interior forest species, which have declined due to fragmentation,” Williams said. Williams also stated that goals for protecting Sparta Mountain never included providing logging opportunities for the forest industry. According to Sierra Club NJ Chapter President Jeff Tittle, where the Sierra Club and the NJ Audubon see very differently is that the Sierra Club sees the Highlands as an area to protect the water supply and for contiguous forest, which neo-tropical songbirds need to breed. Tittle said that if the NJDEP and the NJ Audubon want to make warbler habitat, they should take a former sandpit, quarry, old parking lot, former golf course or other disturbed or barren land and restore them into grassland habitat. The Sierra Club has no problem with creating grassland habitat, he said, but they do have a problem with doing it in the middle of a forest, which changes the deep forest ecology into a meadow ecology. Former NJDEP Policy Analyst and Planner, and former Policy Director for the Sierra Club's NJ Chapter, Bill Wolfe, feels that the different groups involved with this plan have other economic motives, rather than real conservation. “Seeing the players and their games behind the scenes, I find it sinister,” Wolfe said. “They range from the agricultural interests in the farm bureau that look at landowners who own forest blocks of land that want to reap some revenue from that, to other folks that actually want to see a reemergence of the forest products industry in New Jersey — that want to harvest New Jersey hardwood forests in the northern Highlands for timber.” As far as the Audubon Society’s involvement, Wolfe said that the Audubon is either being selfish in trying to promote the interests of the Golden-winged warbler, or they’re being beyond selfish, into greedy and misleading. According to Wolfe, the Audubon has economic interests as an organization with doing this kind of work. The NJ Audubon is the only group in the state that’s certified under the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international group whose mission, according to their website, is to “promote environmentally sound, socially beneficial and economically prosperous management of the world's forests.” According to Tittle, the FSC acts like a governmental agency when they are not, and the Sierra Club has the organization in the past. “To be honest, I will say that it

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4

gives an appearance of propriety, when it really is about taking care of logging interests,” Tittle said. Opponents to the plan, including Williams and Wolfe, have cited research done in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, which shows the effects of forest harvesting on ecosystem health in the headwaters of the New York City water supply. According to the report, after clearcutting, there was 100 percent trout mortality, a fish commonly found in streams in the Sparta Mountain area. However, Trout Unlimited, America's leading trout and salmon conservation organization, has stated in their newsletter and at the township council meeting, that the organization supports the plan. According to Brian Cowden, NJ State Council conservation chair for Trout Unlimited, the organization has a vested interest in a healthy forest in the management area because it spawns several wild trout streams, including Sparta Glen Brook, a native brook trout tributary slated for an in-stream restoration project by the organization this coming spring. “There are concerns mounting by some in the community about this proposed Plan that have been shared with our organization, but we clearly see the benefits of restoring this forest to one far more healthy than it is today,” Cowden stated in the newsletter. “The Highlands region of NJ is so very critical to our state’s drinking water supplies, and healthy forests are where we collect that water that we drink, use for industry and recreation, and to sustain and protect our native brook trout, the state fish. It is no wonder that such a high percentage of wild trout streams occur in the Highlands, and a comprehensive, well conceived Plan such as this will only benefit our forests and our drinking water.” Cowden also said that he manages a 90-acre forest on private land immediately adjacent to the Sparta Mountain management area under a very similar forest stewardship plan, and has done much of the same work proposed under the state's plan on this private forest. When asked about the research showing 100 percent trout mortality, Cowden said that research is not an accurate comparison to the work that would be taking place as part of the Sparta Mountain plan, because the soil conditions were different, among other reasons. What surprises Cowden is that the Sierra Club and others have not, to his knowledge, said anything about the forest management activities that have already been happening over the last few years. He suggested that those questioning the plan go out and see for themselves the successful forest management already happening in the area. “I’ve been watching carefully,” Cowden said. “When it rains, I want to make sure we’re not polluting our streams. After all, I’m the trout guy. I would be pretty disingenuous if I was doing forestry work that impacted negatively Sparta Glen

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5

Brook, as somebody who works on behalf of trout. “Rather than citing all sorts of studies all over the country, I’m here to tell people I’ve seen it first hand,” he said.