



Lesniak's bill would prevent logging on Sparta Mountain



Photo by Daniel Freel/New Jersey Herald Silvia Solaun, right, of the Friends of Sparta Mountain, speaks alongside state Sen. Raymond Lesniak, D-20, at the State House in Trenton. Lesniak introduced a bill on Monday to ban logging within the Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area.

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TRENTON -- "Stop the Chop," a slogan adopted by those against any forestry work within Sparta Mountain Wildlife Management Area, moved from roadside signs and T-shirts to the state Legislature on Monday when state Sen. Raymond Lesniak, D-20, introduced a bill which literally "stops the chop."

The bill, which had not received a number by late Monday afternoon, amends existing state law on the Highlands, and subtracts by addition. In a clause which allows "activity conducted in accordance with an approved woodland management plan," the measure adds "on privately owned lands," which would ban activities on publicly-owned land within the state-designated Highlands.

Lesniak, whose district is four municipalities in Union County and who is an announced candidate for governor in this year's Democrat primary, said he found out about the year-long controversy last month in a Twitter message.

He made an appearance at a Jan. 26 meeting in Franklin, sponsored by Friends of Sparta Mountain, to discuss the latest on the state's proposed updated forestry plan. At the meeting, he promised he would take action.

In addition to the bill amendment which would stop forestry work on public property, Lesniak also introduced a bill which would "codify" a state initiative from 1994 known as the Landscape Project, which was designed to find and protect the state's biodiversity.

While the project was put into effect through state regulations and agency actions, it was never formally adopted.

In addition to adopting and folding the Landscape Project into the Natural Heritage Program, the bill would also require a thorough study of flora and fauna within any area of state-owned lands and ban any activity which would "negatively impact the natural habitat, functioning ecosystem or populations of species" which are of listed by the state as of special concern, rare, threatened or endangered.

At a news conference Monday morning, Lesniak, when asked about the cost to do the increased studies and surveys required under his proposal, said, "the cost is priceless, there can be no cost put onto it," adding that if the state really wants to do such a project it will, ending with the oft-used expression: "Where there's a will, there's a way."

At the end of December 2015, the state Division of Fish and Wildlife released its updated forestry plan for the next 10 years for the 3,461-acre Sparta Mountain WMA. The division had already done work within the area under an existing forestry plan developed under contract with the state by New Jersey Audubon.

But opposition to the updated plan came from the Sierra Club and spread quickly to the privately-owned lake communities within the management area. Through a series of meetings, both between the Department of Environmental Protection and local governing bodies and between those municipalities and citizens groups, such as Friends of Sparta Mountain, resistance to the plan grew.

The state twice extended a public comment period on the plan and has been working to incorporate comments from the public into an updated plan which has yet to be released.

John Cecil, project manager for New Jersey Audubon, said on Monday he expects the plan to be finalized within a couple of weeks. The state will then hold a meeting to discuss the final plan.

At Monday's event, Lesniak said Christopher Bateman, R-16, has signed on as a co-sponsor to the two bills while Assemblyman John McKeon, D-27, is sponsoring the bills in the Assembly.

In a news release following Lesniak's event, Cecil said he looks forward to working with the senator on preserving Sparta Mountain, but said, "This should not be a debate; the science is clear. States throughout the northeast safely and effectively use forestry to create wildlife habitat."

He noted that New Jersey forests lack the natural disturbances, such as forest fires, flooding, wind and ice, "which would allow them to naturally rejuvenate and provide habitat for rare and declining wildlife."

And that seems to be the crux of the debate even among environmental scientists, foresters and ecologists: should forests be "managed," such as the Young Forest Initiative which is being adopted in neighboring states which looks to man to create successional habitat; or should nature be allowed to manage forests itself.

Both sides have used the bird species, the golden-winged warbler -- a species which has been proposed for federal protection as threatened -- as a poster child.

Those looking at management note the species needs such successional (new growth) forests for breeding grounds which could also help other species of birds which use such young growth during its lifecycle.

Those who believe the forest should be mostly left alone, say other species that need the deeper forests will be harmed by the "doughnut-hole" effect of cutting down trees to create forest openings.

Appearing with Lesniak on Monday was Jeff Tittel, executive director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, who said the public lands in New Jersey were purchased with public funds "to be held as open space and to be preserved."

He said the contiguous forests of the Highlands serves as a green belt for wildlife and, importantly, as the headwaters for a natural water supply for six million people.

He also noted that forest stewardship plans, and resulting logging on private property within the Highlands will be allowed and called the Sparta Mountain forestry plan "a con job to take trees which have been around 120 years."

He went on to say the plan is a money-making plan to take New Jersey trees "to be milled in upstate New York or Canada and then shipped to China to be turned into furniture."

Both the state DEP and Audubon have said there has been no profit made on previous work within the management area and many of the projects have been done by volunteers.

Julia Somers, executive director of the Highlands Coalition, repeated the argument about the Highlands supplying water for much of the state's population, but also noted that those same Highlands and their forests draw more visitors each year than do the Yellowstone, Grand Canyon and Yosemite national parks, combined.

Dennis Miranda of Eastern Conservation Advisors, a proponent of the state's Landscape Project, said it should be made a matter of law, but it was "abandoned quietly."

The bills, once assigned numbers in the Assembly and Senate, will be sent to the appropriate committees for discussion and possible action. If no action is taken by the end of the session -- early January 2018 -- the bills will die, but could be resubmitted for consideration when the new Legislature convenes next year.

Lesniak said he doubted Gov. Chris Christie, who is term-limited, would sign the legislation if approved, "but we can delay until next year when I'm sure there will be someone more amenable in office."

He then said, "Gotta practice up," as he signed the proposed legislation as its sponsor, and handed pens to two supporters.