

Environmental groups spar over forestry plan

Audubon at odds with other environmental groups

By ALEX PARKER-MAGYAR Staff Writer: Mar 16, 2016

A controversial forestry plan has state conservation groups at odds with one another.

The Sparta Mountain Forest Wildlife Management Area Stewardship Plan calls for the removal of about 20 acres of forest from the park per year for the next 10 years. The stewardship plan is the first phase of a larger plan to be implemented over 60 years across 3,400 acres of the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Sparta Township, Hardyston Township, Jefferson Township and Ogdensburg. The area is located in the westernmost portion of the New Jersey Highlands.

The plan's backers, the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the New Jersey Audubon Society, which has its headquarters in Bernardsville, say the goal is to maintain the health and diversity of the ecosystem by creating young forest habitat amid the older forest in the Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

DEP and Audubon, which own adjacent parcels of the WMA, say the young forest would provide a habitat for several endangered bird species, such as the Golden-Winged Warbler.

The New Jersey Sierra Club and New Jersey Highlands Coalition say cutting down trees on protected land contradicts the reason the land was purchased in the first place. The non-profit organizations say the creation of young forest is not only superfluous, but dangerous to the area.

The plan's detractors have also said the plan's stated goal is a facade to open up the land to hunting and logging and Audubon stands to make a profit from supporting the plan, a claim Audubon calls "absurd."

"If it ain't broke don't fix it," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club. "The Highlands forests are pretty good how they are. We don't have to go around cutting down trees."

The DEP is currently holding a public comment period that expires on its website on March 31. The state agency then plans to review the comments and develop responses. New Jersey Audubon will also look to respond, but also address proposed changes to the plan. The DEP seeks to hold a public meeting in Sparta Township or another neighboring community to share the responses and allow for additional feedback.

Old And New Forest

John Cecil, New Jersey Audubon's vice president for stewardship, said the plan is about creating habitat for wildlife suited to younger forests or forests with a diversity of young and old trees.

The plan would create new forest through seed tree cutting, through which a few trees are left standing to produce seed after most of the trees in an area are cut down.

“Why not manage the Wildlife Management Area for wildlife?” Cecil asked. “We’re not asking the state to clear-cut 3,400 acres of old forest. We’re only asking over a 20-year time frame we cut 210 acres of the habitat. So it’s a small area of the Wildlife Management Area intended for wildlife that we’re cutting.”

Methods such as shelterwood cutting and group selection would lead to the growth of young trees in mature forests. Age diversity is a naturally occurring attribute of old growth forests. Cecil said New Jersey’s forests, including those of Sparta Mountain, are not old enough to feature those ecosystems aside from areas in which trees have been downed from storms.

The plan states that by creating age-diverse forests, the process would simulate old growth ecosystems suitable for species that inhabit those areas.

“The point is we’re creating young forest – a couple hundred acres worth – and we’re creating old forest, several hundred acres worth,” Cecil said.

New Jersey Highlands Coalition Executive Director Julia Somers said it was “nonsense” to assume the plan would create more old forest than new forest.

“The old forest in New Jersey is not very old,” she said. “I don’t know how you can make trees age faster. What they’re doing is turning old forest into new forest and we don’t need any new forest. We need to protect our old forests.”

Tittel said cutting down trees would negatively affect the region’s water supply and high quality streams as well as recreation in the area. Trees are vital to converting rain into mist, which in turn goes into the ground and recharges aquifers, he explained. Removing trees would not only reduce the absorption of water into the ground, but increase runoff and the chance of flooding, he said.

“The reason we worked to save Sparta Mountain was to protect canopy forest. It’s critical in the Highlands region to help protect the water supply. ... When we passed the Highlands Act we bought this property to protect canopy forest, to protect the Highlands, and this plan goes against the core conservation values for which we bought this property.”

Tittel said the heavy equipment would cause considerable damage going through streams and wetlands. He said crews wouldn’t go tree-by-tree to make sure animals and nests would not be harmed. He added skidders and other heavy equipment, as well as the light introduced by removing the canopy, would cause soil disturbances. Some species may be driven from their homes or find the environment unsuitable and never return, he said.

The plan lists several measures to be taken to minimize risks to rare species and their habitat, including keeping a distance from wetlands and the tree removal operations will cease if nests or territorial behavior signaling the presence of a nest are observed.

Somers said the depiction of the tree removal methods in the plan are misleading.

“In seed tree cutting they would cut down 10 acres to one tree left standing.”

She said the other methods are “similarly extreme.”

Cecil called comparisons of seed tree and shelterwood cutting to clear-cutting “patently false.”

He said the plan will be implemented to Forestry Stewardship Certification (FSC) standards, and the plan was written by experts and thoroughly reviewed by the DEP.

“We are the only group in the state working under these FSC standards. We adopted them because they are the highest standards you can go under.”

Endangered Species

The stewardship plan uses the Golden-Winged Warbler (GWW), an endangered species in New Jersey, as an umbrella species, meaning protection of the bird would also protect other wildlife in the WMA. The warbler is in need of young forest habitat to survive in the region. Cecil cited a number of other species that would benefit from the plan.

Tittel said there are better ways to create GWW habitat than cutting down trees on the protected land, such as creating habitats under power lines, and in sandpits and abandoned parking lots.

“I have nothing against the golden warbler, but there are plenty of places we can open warbler habitat,” he said.

Cecil estimated that half of the GWW in the area are under power lines as other suitable habitats such as abandoned farms and fields have grown. He said the state cannot rely on those fragmented habitats alone to provide all the habitat for the species as the habitat leaves the GWW open to attacks from predators such as hawks and falcons, and makes the species’ survival subject to our need for energy.

Only 25 breeding pairs of the bird remain in the state.

“We think it’s just putting all our eggs in one basket.”

He said allowing new forest to grow would provide a safer, permanent habitat for the warbler.

The DEP’s Division of Fish and Wildlife’s list of at-risk species cites the presence of the Blue-Winged Warbler, and possibly climate change, have pushed much of the GWW population north. The combination of hybridization and competition for resources means cohabitation between the two species would not be favorable to the growth of the GWW population.

The plan aims to separate the two species by creating GWW habitat at a higher elevation and in more densely forested areas than the Blue-Winged Warbler prefers.

Emile DeVito, manager of science and stewardship at the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, said the Blue-Winged Warbler’s presence in the Sparta Mountain WMA, as well as climate change, make it difficult for the GWW to persist in New Jersey for more than a decade or two.

He said it is still worth a shot, but has his reservations on the overall plan.

“Many think there’s no point to helping the Golden-Winged Warbler in New Jersey, but I won’t go that far,” he said. “I’m willing to try and do something for the Golden-Winged Warbler in the next few years and this is one of the few places you can try that.”

“If the plan was solely to create Golden-Winged Warbler using small clear-cuts, then I would be in support of it,” he said later, “but to lump in all these other acres of forest with questionable benefit is not scientifically necessary whatsoever.”

DeVito was also skeptical of the plan's impact on other threatened species. Of the 41 rare, threatened and endangered species in the WMA listed in the plan, DeVito said only seven would probably benefit from the plan.

Ulterior Motives

Tittel said the plan is not really about stewardship, but about logging to generate income for the state. He said the plan betrays the public trust and the reason the property was purchased.

"The whole idea of preserving the Golden-Winged Warbler is an excuse to log," he said. "It's not based on sound science, it's not based on conservation values."

Tittel said large canopy oaks would be worth at least \$2,000 apiece at a mill, and hundreds of trees would amount to millions of dollars for the state.

"It becomes an excuse to take down the oaks where the money is."

Profits from opening up the state-owned land to loggers would benefit the state, not New Jersey Audubon, but the organization could benefit going forward from being the only FSC certified organization in New Jersey.

State Senate bill S768, sponsored by Bob Smith, D-Middlesex, and Steven Oroho, R-Morris, Sussex, would establish forest stewardship programs for state-owned lands. Audubon would stand to receive grant funding on similar stewardship projects in the future were the bill to pass.

"Every nonprofit has to pay its bills," said Somers.

Somers said the passage of the Sparta Mountain plan would set a dangerous precedent because it would serve as the model for forestry projects on public land for the DEP going forward.

Cecil called the notion that New Jersey Audubon seeks to profit from the plan "absurd." He said the organization is seeking to save endangered species, advocate, educate people and help the state manage the properties. He added the organization is paying to implement the plan to FSC standards, and that is money that Audubon could have allocated elsewhere.