

Chatham Courier

State park logging?

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Private companies may get the green light to launch commercial forestry and logging businesses in New Jersey's state parks under a bill making its way through the state Legislature.

The proposal to allow the state Department of Environmental Protection to award a five-year contract to a project manager to oversee a forestry harvest program has drawn the ire of environmentalists, who say the legislation has no guarantees that public access to the parks won't be affected by falling timber and fear the plan does not take into account the ravaging of deer and invasive species that are uniquely devastating in New Jersey woods.

On one hand, supporters who include hunting and wildlife groups, including New Jersey Audubon, say the program will invigorate aging dense forests, where little sunlight gets through, and bolster animal populations. They argue that forests, for their own healthy, well-being, need to be periodically parsed so new growth can flourish.

Fine, say the bill's detractors, but what safeguards are in place to protect those new vulnerable saplings and seedlings from the devastations of herds of hungry deer that leave little in a forest's under story?

"We must address the deer before we cut any trees, so new ones have a fighting chance," said Emile DeVito, a forest ecologist for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, based in Far Hills.

Julia Somers, executive director of the Highlands Coalition, agrees.

They reject the so-called "shady science" and argue that storms and dead trees naturally create openings for sunlight and have survived for millions of years that way.

And logging, they say, does not control a hungry deer population and a rampaging invasive species that will eat and overcome any new growth on the forest floor.

Instead they fear what will be left when the trees are cut will not be new saplings and new growth but muddy tracks and an unnatural mess left by massive logging machinery.

Jon Wagar, vice president for conservation programs at Conservation Resources in Chester and the director of land acquisition and stewardship for the 750-acre Schiff Natural Lands Trust in Mendham Township, agrees any logging here needs to include restoration measures that take into account the deer overpopulation and invasive species issues.

While logging in other parts of the country, such as Maine, will see new growth after trees have been cut down, that is not true here, he said.

Schiff, he said, bought land several years ago in Mendham Township that been logged in 2005 and nothing was able to grow back because of the deer, he recalled.

Wagar, however, supports the logging bill because it does call for thought-out land management and active stewardship of the state's public lands which, he said, is desperately needed.

Other environmental organizations, however, like the Highlands Coalition, want more safeguards in place before they support a logging plan

“You need a database of what you have now before you plan how to manage it,” said Somers, calling for an inventory of what is in the state’s forests now so as to develop a future point of comparison. A uniform monitoring plan should also be established to closely gage the effects of logging.

“Otherwise, you end up making the same mistakes over and over again,” Somers said.

Democrat Assemblyman John McKeon, D-Essex whose 27th District includes Chatham Township, is one of the primary sponsors behind the plan. Let him know what you think.

A McKeon spokeswoman said a vote on the bill could come as early as next Monday, Jan. 9.

We urge caution and postponement to get a better grasp of the science of the plan with its unique New Jersey challenges before we risk pillaging the state’s wonderful forests and then are left with nothing to show for it on the forest floor.

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