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Pataki Unveils Deal to Protect 104,000 Acres in Adirondacks

By ANTHONY DePALMA

More than 100,000 acres of forested woodlands in the remote northeastern Adirondacks will be protected from development and opened to the public for the first time in a century under an agreement announced yesterday by Gov. George E. Pataki.

The agreement is the third-largest land conservation deal in New York history. It is especially significant because most of the 104,000 acres — some 15 square miles of magnificent forests, crystalline lakes and rugged mountain peaks — form a single uninterrupted tract. The land is in the Sable Highlands region of the Adirondacks, a gateway for large mammals like moose and an important breeding site for warblers, orioles and other migratory birds.

In making the deal public, Governor Pataki said the state was strengthening protection of the six-million-acre Adirondack Park, “while continuing to sustain a critical aspect of the north country economy.”

Like earlier conservation efforts, this deal ensures that the Adiron-

dack lands remain working forest in that it includes provisions to preserve jobs in the timber industry, protect the tax bases of local communities and permit the continuing use of hunting camps.

But like other conservation efforts, this one is also getting its share of criticism from local officials who say Governor Pataki is putting the interests of hikers and environmentalists before the needs of people who live and work in the Adirondacks. “All this does is serve a political purpose, which is to support the legacy that Pataki wants to build for himself,” said Howard Aubin, a councilman who owns a sawmill in Au Sable Forks, an old mill town just south of the land involved in the deal.

Mr. Pataki has made preserving open space in New York one of the priorities of his tenure, committing the state to protect more than one million acres of land within a decade.

Environmentalists have given the governor high marks for land conservation. But Mr. Aubin, 50, who has lived in the Adirondacks all his life, said that each land agreement had caused hardship for year-round resi-

Environmentalists applaud, but local officials cry politics.

dents of the park, which is a combination of public and private land created more than a century ago.

“It’s tough enough to make a living up here in the winter time,” he said, “but when you start chipping away at what can be done here, it’s even tougher.”

The land transaction involved all the Adirondack land owned by Domtar Industries, a Canadian paper manufacturer whose forestry management practices have met the exacting standards of the Forest Stewardship Council, an international nonprofit organization.

Under the complex agreement brokered by the Nature Conservancy, Domtar will sell 84,448 acres to the Lyme Timber Company, which has its headquarters in Hanover,

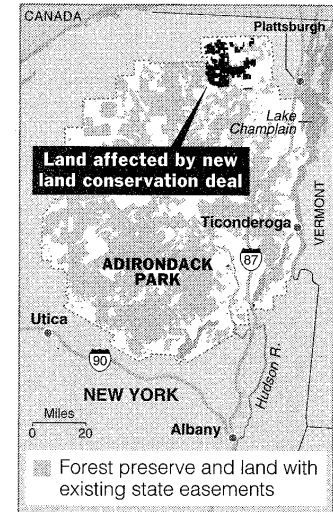
N.H., and which will continue to cut and process trees under the same forestry practices as Domtar.

Existing snowmobile trails will be maintained, but new ones cannot be opened. More than 47,000 acres that were off limits will be available for hiking, camping, fishing and cross-country skiing.

At the same time, Domtar will sell the development rights to the land to the state, which effectively means nothing will ever be built there. Lyme will pay lower local property taxes because of the conservation easements, and the state will make up the difference so the local communities in Franklin and Clinton Counties do not lose tax revenue.

The Nature Conservancy will purchase the remaining 20,000 acres — rugged land that has been only lightly cut and which includes the 3,800-foot-high Lyon Mountain. The conservancy will hold the parcel of land until the state can acquire it as part of the Adirondack forest preserve.

“Having a 104,000-acre tract of intact, contiguous forestland that was privately owned, unprotected and without any public access become



A state pact preserves a large tract in the Sable Highlands region.

available in 2004 is kind of an incredible thing,” said Henry G. Tepper, state director of the Nature Conservancy. “It offers an immense conservation opportunity.”