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ADIRONDACKS : Controversial fire towers protected, with restoration the goal

BY STEPHEN WILLIAMS Gazette Reporter

As one of his last acts in office, former Gov. David Paterson signed off on classifying the two old fire towers on Hurricane and St. Regis mountains as "historic."

The classification means they won't be removed from their mountaintops even though the land around them is wilderness, and it keeps open the possibility that they could be restored as hiking destinations.

Even though restorations are likely to be done privately, work can't go forward until the state Department of Environmental Conservation develops a unit management plan for each of them — and given DEC personnel cutbacks, neither supporters nor opponents think that will be anytime soon.

The fate of the two towers has stirred passions both among advocates for their restoration and opponents who feel they should be torn down as man-made structures in lands designated as Adirondack wilderness.

"We didn't like the idea. We thought it was spot zoning. We felt both summits deserved to be wilderness," said John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

The council, along with other environmental groups like the Adirondack Mountain Club and Adirondack Wild, had opposed the historic designation.

Now, the council thinks budget-related cutbacks at DEC mean nothing will happen. "We're just not comfortable that it's going to happen anytime soon," Sheehan said.

But Bill Starr of Scotia, a former fire observer and state director of the Forest Fire Lookout Association, said the necessary work to write a management plan for the half-acre sites around the base of each tower is already done.

"It's going to be a long, drawnout process as usual," Starr said. But he called Paterson's designation "a positive step."

Paterson cast his decision as striking an appropriate balance, since the mountaintops surrounding the towers were designated as wilderness.

"Our action today affirms the state's commitment to wilderness and honors the historic significance these fire towers represent to so many people throughout the Adirondacks," Paterson said in a statement on Dec. 30.

The Hurricane tower overlooking Elizabethtown and the St. Regis tower northwest of Saranac Lake are among about two dozen remaining Adirondack fire towers.

Fifty-seven fire towers were built in the park after a series of devastating fires in the early 1900s. In the 1970s and 1980s, they were decommissioned and many of them were dismantled. About 20 remain on state-owned land, but the other 18 are in areas that allow man-made structures. Some of those have been restored and have become popular hiking destinations.

Advocates of keeping the two controversial towers have cited their historic value and their potential as destinations for hiking.

The DEC, in developing landuse management plans, early last year recommended the Hurricane and St. Regis towers be removed and their

mountains be declared wilderness. But the Adirondack Park Agency, after public hearings last year that were dominated by tower preservation sentiment, recommended they be declared historic.

The 35-foot tower on 3,694-foot Hurricane was erected in 1919, the year after the 35-foot tower on St. Regis, according to Paul Laskey's book, "The Fire Observation Towers of New York State."

Despite their age, Starr said the towers should be able to be restored for about \$15,000 each. Private fundraising efforts are already well under way, and actual restoration work would be done privately.

"They may look like they're ready to fall over, but that isn't true," Starr said. "They need some tender loving care, but they can be restored."

The fire tower designations were just two among several Adirondack land use classifications Paterson approved on Dec. 30. Paterson also approved a plan for the Moose River Plains that makes its remote southern section wilderness, while declaring the roadside camping area on the Limekiln Lake-Cedar River Road a new intensive use camping area.

Sheehan said the Adirondack Council considers those designations "a good compromise."

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