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Conservancy Buys Large Area Of Adirondack Wilderness

By ANTHONY DePALMA

The last big piece of privately owned timberland in the Adirondacks — a craggy 161,000-acre wilderness of hardwood forests, 80 mountain peaks, 70 crystal-clear lakes and ponds, undammed rivers, white water gorges and secluded bogs — has been sold for \$110 million to the Nature Conservancy, in a move intended to protect the land from future development.

The transaction — one of the largest ever in the Adirondack Park — is also significant because it includes a working forest agreement to allow selective cutting of timber to continue for 20 years, providing trees to the Finch Paper mill in Glens Falls and helping preserve 850 jobs at the mill, which has been a fixture in the region for more than a century.

The land sale was part of a complicated business transaction in which an investment group led by Atlas Holdings and Blue Wolf Capital Management, and operating under the name Finch Paper Holdings, acquired the privately held company Finch, Pruyn & Company, a local business that traced its roots back to 1865.

***A move to protect
161,000 acres
from development.***

Following the model set by other paper companies in recent years that have sold off their vast holdings of timberland, the new owners decided to sell Finch, Pruyn's



Stewart Cairns for The New York Times

Selective cutting of timber will be allowed to continue for 20 years to provide trees and preserve jobs at the Finch Paper mill in Glens Falls, N.Y.

161,000 acres, offering the land to the Nature Conservancy, a nonprofit conservation group.

Henry Tepper, the New York State director of the conservancy, said that because of the extraordinary nature of the land that is being protected, the organization had to act quickly to make sure the property was not broken up or sold piecemeal to a developer.

Finch Paper Holdings first raised the option of selling the land to the conservancy just six weeks ago. Deals of this size and importance often take an entire year.

“Our major accomplishment here, in moving as quickly as we have moved, is that we have kept this extraordinary hold-

ing intact,” Mr. Tepper said. “There was a very real chance that the mill and forest could have been broken up and sold in separate sales, which would have meant that we would lose a 100-year tradition of sustainable forestry on this land.”

The Adirondack Park, created in 1892, is the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States, greater in size than Yellowstone, Everglades, Glacier and Grand Canyon National Parks combined.

The park encompasses approximately six million acres, nearly half of which are publicly owned, and half composed of private farms, timberlands, businesses, homes and camps.

The 161,000 acres purchased by the conservancy is situated between Long Lake and Keene Valley in the heart of the Adirondacks. Besides preserving it as a working forest, the Nature Conservancy said it intended to renew about 140 annual recreational leases with hunting clubs and other organizations that have a long tradition of using the land.

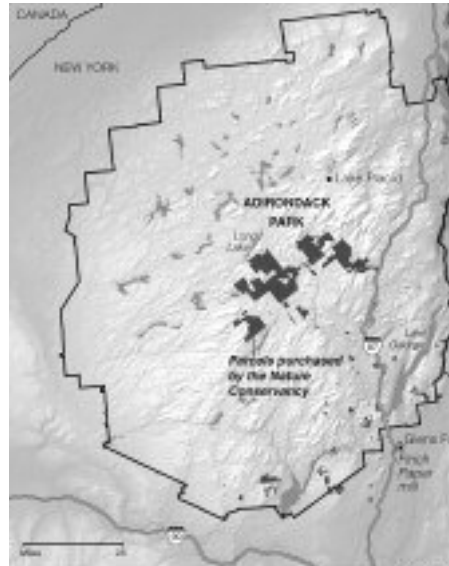
The conservancy will also continue to pay \$1.1 million in local property taxes to the 31 towns in 6 counties where the land is situated.

The final disposition of the land has not yet been determined, Mr. Tepper said. One option is to hold the land until the state can purchase it. The conservancy could also sell some of the property to a timber investment management organization that would oversee the sustainable harvest of the trees but keep out residential development.

Eventually some parts of the property being sold — which has been closed to the public since Ulysses S. Grant was president — could be opened for limited public recreational use, though that has not yet been decided.

For now, access is generally limited to scenic views along Blue Ridge Road and other thoroughfares that border Finch lands.

In the recent past, some paper companies in New York have sold only the development rights to their Adirondack lands



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The Adirondack Park, which covers approximately six million acres, is the largest publicly protected area in the contiguous United States.

while retaining ownership.

Adam Blumenthal, managing general partner of Blue Wolf Capital Management, one of the partners in the new holding company, said that selling the property outright was considered the better option because doing so brought an infusion of capital that “provided a strong financial basis for the mill to go forward while also assuring fiber supply for the long term.”

John F. Sheehan, of the Adirondack Council, an environmental group, said the 161,000 acres — which include what he called some of the wildest country in the Adirondack Park — are “crucial to the park’s biological diversity and completeness in terms of ecological protection.” He said that continuing timber operations that provide jobs and have been sustainably managed is considered compatible with the Adirondack Park’s preservation goals.

According to biological inventories prepared by the conservancy, the Finch property is home to 95 different animal species, including 37 that are considered rare in New York. The land also supports 91 species of birds. The Hudson River Gorge, which is sometimes called New York’s Grand Canyon, flows through the property.

With this acquisition, the Nature Conservancy has protected 556,572 acres in the Adirondacks since 1971.

The group financed the \$110 million Finch purchase with loans from the Open Space Conservancy, the land acquisition arm of the Open Space Institute. The John Hancock Life Insurance Company is continuing an existing mortgage.

Mr. Tepper said the conservancy would undertake a major fund-raising project to cover the purchase price. And over the next year to 18 months, the conservancy will meet with community leaders, lease holders and the state to determine how best to manage the land.