

NJDEP hears sides on Wharton State Forest plan

By David Levinsky, Staff writer | Posted: Friday, November 6, 2015 5:45 am

HAMMONTON — New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection officials wanted public input before rewriting a plan to close some trails in Wharton State Forest to motor vehicles.

They ended up listening to several hours worth of debate during a public hearing Thursday that attracted hundreds of residents from across the state and stretched late into the night.

At issue is a proposed Motorized Access Plan delineating which of the roughly 500 miles of sand roads, trails and unimproved firebreaks through the forest should be open to motor vehicles.

The issue has been an explosive one since August, when the department first unveiled a draft plan designating about 225 miles of trails as off-limits to motorized vehicles but open to hikers, bicyclists and horseback riders.

Supporters of the original plan have argued it is needed to protect the forest's natural spaces and resources from illegal off-road riding by some jeeps, trucks and motorcycles. They also claim overuse of some trails not intended for motor vehicles creates safety hazards in the forest and strains the State Forestry Services' limited maintenance budget.

Opponents complained that the original plan was created in secret without any public input and would limit access of law-abiding citizens to areas of the forest without improving enforcement of illegal off-road activity.

In response to the complaints, the DEP and Forestry Service scrapped the original closure plan and solicited input from stakeholder groups. Those meetings were held last month and featured discussions with representatives from environmental groups, hunters and fishing clubs, and motor-vehicle recreation clubs.

Thursday's hearing was scheduled to permit residents and other interested people to weigh in and provide ideas and feedback, DEP officials said.



Jonathan Goodman (from left, in white), of Williamstown; Justin DePalo, of Middletown; Cali Janulis, of Glassboro; T.J. Holloway, of Glassboro; and Mohammed Faisal, of Glassboro, hold signs during a hearing about new regulations in Wharton State Forest at Hammonton High School on Thursday, Nov. 5, 2015.

"We're looking forward to hearing your thoughts, ideas and concerns," Kerry Pflugh, the DEP's director of constituent relations, said at the onset of the hearing at Hammonton High School in Atlantic County.

Several hundred people crammed into the auditorium, many of them holding signs with messages like "Scrap the Map" or "Wharton is Not a Motor Sports Park."

Dozens spoke, with comments largely split equally among people who urged DEP to quickly implement trail closures and opponents who pushed for better enforcement of illegal off-road riding and improved maintenance of existing trails.

Many speakers used their time at the microphone to thank DEP Commissioner Bob Martin for scrapping the original plan and starting over with public input.

"What I saw this past July wasn't a matter of protection. It was tyranny. Whatever you come up with, it's important to consider all of us," said David Dempsey, a leader with the grassroots NJ Open Trails group.

Other speakers said they were still worried that the department planned to release a plan that would greatly restrict access, particularly to seniors and the disabled.

"This year it's 250 miles. Next year it'll be 300 miles. Twenty years later there will be a fence around Wharton State Forest and only the environmentalists will be able to go in there," said Alan Rose, of Tabernacle.

"If you don't have access with your vehicles, you're discriminating against the old. I don't know how you can do it," Rose added.

Members of several environmental and conservation groups said they support the department's decision to solicit public input, but they urged the department to be mindful of existing state and federal rules governing the protection of environmentally-sensitive wetlands and areas of endangered or threatened wildlife.

"It's important to recognize that professionals in your department have worked hard to come up with a plan," said Ken Sparkman, of Medford. "Whether you're a hiker, a birdwatcher, a kayaker or a Birkenstock wearer, you should not be able to drive your vehicle — be it a Prius, a Jeep or a truck — in every nook and cranny of the forest."

"The slate is not blank. It's deeply etched with several environmental regulations," said Chris Jage, a trustee with the nonprofit Rancocas Conservancy, adding that close to 225 miles of the trails through Wharton had already been identified as traversing sensitive areas.

"These roads are effectively off the table," he said.

Other speakers urged environmental groups and motor vehicle clubs to work together to help

maintain trails and report illegal activity.

"Nobody here is going to say they're hellbent for every inch of the forest. We can help DEP put together and get something positive as a result," said Bill Caruso, a Berlin resident who previously worked as chief of staff to former U.S. Rep. Rob Andrews.

DEP and Forestry are expected to write a new plan specifying road and trail closures. No timetable for the completion of that task has been announced.