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LOGGING PLAN: SAVING THE FOREST FROM THE TREES

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A 415-acre tract of state forest around Nimham Mountain in Kent has been targeted by state and New York City environmental agencies for development as a model managed forest.

Up to 60 percent of trees in some sections of the forest would be cut down as part of the demonstration logging project. If the project is shown to be economically successful and environmentally beneficial to the forest's overall health, officials and environmental groups hope it will provide an incentive for private landowners to keep more than 600,000 acres of forests in the New York City watershed as permanent forest habitat, rather than selling them for commercial development.

"Forest management, if done properly, is an excellent way to have an economic return on the land without damaging the environment," said Jim Tierney, the state's watershed inspector general. "The goal is to convince local owners of forests to provide conservation easements to the state that the land will only be used for forestry purposes, as opposed to another mall or subdivision spread out over the hilltops."

The plan also would prevent the maturation of an unbroken, old-growth forest stretching across the region from Connecticut to the New Jersey border. The extensive use of herbicides will remove several acres of Japanese barberry and other invasive shrubs that clog the forest floor and prevent the development of open glades and the growth of young native tree seedlings.

The project, to begin in May, calls for construction of up to two miles of logging roads on Coles Mills Road and other pathways through the state-owned land, and unpaved "skid trails" for dragging cut trees through the forest to processing areas. The roads, to be built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will use bridges and other systems designed to minimize the impact on streams and wetlands in the center of the Hudson Highlands.

"The logging is just a means to an objective," said Jeff Wiegert, supervising forester

for the state Department of Environmental Conservation. "Forest management promotes the growth of the biggest and best trees, and there is removal of the wood which isn't as hardy. The focus here is on water quality, and managing the forest properly improves the quality of the watershed."

The demonstration forest, one of four being developed on state-owned land, is a combined project of the state DEC, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection and the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse. The plan has the backing of many environmental groups seeking conservation easements on privately held forest land.

"We think it is one way the watershed lands can be protected from development," said Cathleen Breen of the New York Public Interest Research Group.

Rene Germain, associate professor of forest and natural resources management at SUNY, said the project will demonstrate the best ways to manage a forest to maximize its economic potential and ensure healthy habitats for forest wildlife.

"If we want to regenerate a healthy forest, we need to thin it," Germain said. "What we are doing there at Nimham is we are going to go in and enhance the growth and health of existing trees, and plan for the future by regenerating a new forest. It's like a garden, like weeding a garden."

The area to be logged is part of the 2,820-acre Hudson Highlands forest area, encompassing parts of Kent, Philipstown, Patterson, Putnam Valley and Southeast in Putnam County, Cortlandt in Westchester County, and Beekman and Pawling in Dutchess County. The DEC subdivides the forest into six tracts, the largest being the 1,023-acre Nimham Mountain forest in Kent. The demonstration project will be in the center of the Kent forest off Route 301, abutting the West Branch Reservoir and Putnam County Park. It is an area that has undergone considerable change over the past 300 years.

"Think of what New York and most of New England looked like 100 years ago before agriculture collapsed," Germain said. "We cut down all our forests when they colonized the area for farming. When the farms went out of business in the 1900s, all those farms slowly turned back into forests. We were only 25 percent forested then. Now, we are 60 percent forested, and we do not have a shortage of trees."

During the past 100 years, the Hudson Highlands has slowly evolved into an untouched band of state and local forests stretching in an unbroken 44-mile line. It is considered by experts to be a maturing forest, with a motley mixture of tree varieties and many areas overgrown with brambles, invasive plants and trees too close together. In another 50 years or so, it could become the first contiguous strand of old-growth forest in the lower Hudson Valley since early settlers eviscerated the region.

Germain said timber harvesting would improve the forest's aesthetics. In a forest that is not yet mature, he said, many trees are crowded together, cramping development of their individual root structures, draining mineral resources in the ground and blocking sunlight from reaching the ground and nourishing bushes and seedlings.

"If you thin out a strand of trees," he said, "you take out the weaker trees and allow

the fuller ones to become future crop trees. Birds that require open fields have trouble in that area because the fields aren't there. You see them now along the highways looking for food."

Some environmentalists question the need for a logging operation in Nimham. Jeff Green, a Kent resident and member of the local environmental group Plan Putnam, said if the logging proceeds, the forest's description should be changed to "a garden, a timber woodlot."

"The forests here today are 80 to 100 years old, the oldest they have been in 300 years," Green said. "We have a unique opportunity here. If the DEC does not log the forest, we are halfway to a major swath of old-growth forest just 50 miles from more than 20 million people."

George Baum of the Kent Conservation Advisory Committee said the logging would create an artificial environment.

"They will take out more than just the invasive trees," Baum said. "They really want to promote the growth of trees that are more desirable in terms of commercial wood. Two of the areas they plan to develop for open staging areas for logging trucks are largely populated by oaks. That seems to me to be a desirable species. The cutting and clearing they intend to do may improve the worth of the wood that eventually grows here. But in terms of having a nice place to visit and walk around, I think it will have an adverse effect."

The management program calls for eliminating nonnative trees, as well as those that are less commercially viable. The program would cultivate oak, maple, ash and walnut, and cut down boxelder, bitternut hickory, elm and ironwood.

At an international conference last week on the preservation of the world's 105 top urban watersheds, the World Wildlife Fund and the World Bank presented a three-year study concluding that managing forest watersheds for their economic value is one of the best ways to preserve them.

Yet, Bob Irwin, the wildlife fund's conservation director, noted that the report did not say forests must be managed as woodlot. "Certainly, one option should always be, what happens if we just let it alone and let it resort to its fully natural state? A forest left alone and allowed over time to become something approximating what was here before settlement is the best of all possible worlds."

William Schlesinger, dean of the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University, suggested the state move the project to other available forests in the Hudson River Valley or upstate.

"Old growth forests, particularly those surrounding urban areas, have an aesthetic value of their own," he said. "Why convert it into a managed lot?"

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