NEW YORK STATE OF OPPORTUNITY. | Department of Environmental Conservation

VANDERWHACKER MOUNTAIN WILD FOREST

Draft Amendment

to the

2005 Vanderwhacker Mtn. Wild Forest Unit Management Plan

River Area Management Plan

for the

Schroon River

NYS DEC, DIVISION OF LANDS AND FORESTS

625 Broadway, 5th Floor, Albany, NY 12233
P: (518) 402-9405 | F: (518) 402-9028 | adirondackpark@dec.ny.gov

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest (VMWF) is located in the counties of Essex, Warren and Hamilton. It is approximately 91,854 acres in size. A Unit Management Plan (UMP) for this area was completed in 2005. A subsequent UMP amendment in 2015, titled the Community Connector Trail Plan (CCTP), proposed the designation of multiple-use trails, classification of the snowmobile trail system, placement of primitive tent sites, and construction of a bridge over the outlet of Palmer Pond.

In March 2016 the UMP was amended again, as part of the Essex Chain Lakes Management Complex Plan. This amendment proposes an additional multiple-use trail connection between the communities of Minerva and Indian Lake. These documents are collectively hereby incorporated by reference.

This amendment builds on the 2005 UMP and subsequent UMP amendments by proposing the following actions:

- Creation of facilities for persons with disabilities in the vicinity of Palmer Pond;
- Improvement of the Moxham Mountain Trailhead and Balfour Lake parking areas; and
- Replacement of a footbridge across the Boreas River.

This amendment also serves as the River Area Management Plan for the activities proposed within the river area of the Schroon River. The Schroon River is designated a recreational river, pursuant to the Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers System Act (Rivers Act) in the vicinity of the proposed Palmer Pond bridge. The River Area Management Plan is provided in Appendix 3.

II. MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Public Use and Access

1. Access for Persons with Disabilities

Background:
The State holds a Conservation Easement on a property adjacent to VMWF at Palmer Pond. The Upper Hudson Woodlands ATP Conservation Easement grants the State the right to build a parking area, accessible privy, accessible pier and an accessible boat launch on the easement property. However, the intended site is significantly far from road frontage and is greatly constrained by steep slopes. Alternatively, the site near the dam on Palmer Pond, located on Forest Preserve, is more suitable and is already significantly more developed. As such, the proposed site on VMWF was chosen because it will have less of an environmental impact than the Upper Hudson Woodlands ATP site, while achieving the same goal.

The recreation rights obtained pursuant to the conservation easement are intended to provide improved recreational access for persons with disabilities. Similarly, one of the stated objectives of the 2005 UMP is to “ensure Department compliance with the

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) – Title II, the proposed and adopted [Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines], and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act by improving access and creating recreational opportunities for people with disabilities."[1] Establishing the proposed access point to Palmer Pond for persons with disabilities contributes to the achievement of this objective.

Objectives:

- Provide universally accessible waterway access to Palmer Pond while protecting the natural environment.
- Design and construct all designated accessible facilities in compliance with ADA standards for materials, dimensions, slope, etc.

Management Actions:

1. Palmer Pond Access Site

a. Parking Area

This amendment proposes utilization of a previously cleared location, just north of the dam, as a parking area. Users will enter from the existing driveway on Blue Ridge Road. Currently, the entrance and access drive is maintained by the Department for administrative access to the dam. In order to minimize the visual effect of the parking lot on Blue Ridge Rd and Palmer Pond the parking area will be kept as close to Blue Rudge Rd as possible. Additionally vegetation will be allowed to grow between the parking area and the pond to the greatest extent possible while still complying with dam safety regulations.

This is also the site of the staging area for development of the Newcomb to North Hudson Community Connector Trail, including the previously approved bridge over the pond outlet. It is anticipated that a small amount of brush clearing and the addition of gravel (including an accessible surface) will be needed. Boulders will likely be used to delineate the parking area to allow for 6 to 8 cars, including the designation of 2 universally accessible parking spots.

b. Pier

The pier design is derived from the Designs Guidebook[2]. A sample drawing of the cribbing pier structure is in Appendix 2. A pier is preferable to a dock because maintenance costs will be lower and the structure will be more user-friendly. The height of the pier will be low, maybe only a foot above water (the exact height still to be determined). The walkway will be generally 4 to 5 feet wide, with corners and resting areas constructed to a maximum width of 8 feet wide, in compliance with current ADA standards. The walkway will be constructed primarily of gravel. Sections of boardwalk will be used where necessary. Railings will be built as needed pursuant to the Designs Guidebook, particularly on turns and elevated areas.

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[1] April 2005 Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest Unit Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement, Section IV, Management Recommendations, E. Public Use and Access, Access for Persons with Disabilities

[2] 2015, State of New York Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Operations, Bureau of Design and Construction, DEC Standard Accessible Designs for Outdoor Recreational Facilities, Timber Crib Fishing Pier

c. Water Access
An accessible water access site will be installed next to the pier. The approach into the water will generally follow the existing gravel slope, but minor modifications of slope, and the addition of a hardened material in order to create a firm and stable surface will be necessary.

This site is designed for persons with disabilities. As such, the path to the water follows a gradual approach because the direct approach is too steep. If the public avoids the path and walks straight down the slope to access the launch, erosion of the bank may occur. If this situation occurs, to prevent erosion, the Department will consult with the APA and may consider building steps and a wooden chute to lower boats to the water.

d. Privy
An accessible path to an accessible privy will be built in the vicinity of the parking area.

e. Fishing Access Sign
A fishing access sign will be installed on Blue Ridge Road in order to mark the site.

f. Register
A kiosk with a trail register will be installed at the parking area. It will post a detailed map depicting the surrounding Forest Preserve lands and nearby communities, as well as appropriate fishing and boating information. The kiosk will be built to accessible standards as described in the Accessible Design Guidebook.

2. Parking Areas

Background:

A. The Moxham Mountain Trail was constructed after the 2005 VMWF UMP and has since become a very popular destination. Upon trail construction, a 4-car parking lot was also built adjacent to the trailhead at a point that utilized the widest part of the road shoulder. This location is pinched between the road and a neighboring property line so space is limited. In recent years the popularity of this hike has increased and it is now not uncommon to have 15 cars parked roadside along 14th Road. This not only creates a pinch point for traffic, but also results in the expansion of the road shoulder and encroachment onto the Forest Preserve.

B. The Balfour Lake parking lot was recently hardened and made accessible. The entrance to the parking lot is steep and placed in such a way that makes it difficult to turn around and leave the lot. There is an old driveway entrance south of the lot that, with minimal upgrading, could connect to the lot and allow for drive-through access.

Management Actions:

- Construct a 5-car parking lot across the road and slightly west from the Moxham Mountain trailhead in order to reduce the number of cars parking along the side

of the road. This location will avoid wetlands but require some tree cutting and excavation.

- Re-establish the southern entrance to the Balfour Lake Parking Lot. This will require minimal tree cutting, excavation, gravel and delineation with boulders.

- Extend the Balfour Lake parking area towards the lake by 10 feet in order to allow for easier parking and maneuvering in the lot.

3. Lester Flow Foot Bridge

Background:

The Cheney Pond to Irishtown Trail has historically been used as a snowmobile and foot trail, connecting Blue Ridge Rd in Newcomb to Irishtown Rd in Minerva, much of which lies on an abandoned town road. The 2015 Community Connector Trail Plan discontinued the use of snowmobiles on the majority of this trail, but it is still used for other non-motorized recreation. The trail crosses the Boreas River at the base of Lester Flow, but the bridge has been out for many years. The river can be crossed on rocks at times of low water but this is a safety concern and a practice that could lead to unacceptable vegetation trampling and erosion. This area of the Boreas River is designated as Scenic under the Rivers Act.

Management Action:

- Construct a foot bridge over the Boreas River in order to allow safe, non-motorized recreational use, and to protect the river banks against over use.

III. Schedule of Implementation

Year 1-2:
The Palmer Pond Access site construction will coincide with the snowmobile trail bridge construction just south of the pond. The parking area will likely be completed last.

Year 2:
Construct the 5-car parking lot at Moxham Mountain.
Construct the additional access to the Balfour Lake Parking Lot.
Construct the foot bridge over the Boreas River on the Cheney Pond to Irishtown Trail.

Appendix 1: Pond Description

A description of Palmer Pond was not included in the 2005 Vanderwhacker Mountain UMP.

48. Palmer Dam Pond (UH-P453A)
This 31-acre pond was created by an impoundment on The Branch River. The maximum depth is about 18 feet. A 2012 survey revealed the pond supports the stocked brown trout and native-but-widely-introduced brown bullhead. Atlantic Salmon are stocked in The Branch River above the dam and also below in the Schroon River System, but habitat is not favorable in the pond itself.
Management Class: Coldwater

Appendix 2: River Area Management Plan for Schroon River

1. General

The Community Connector Trail Plan (CCTP) Unit Management Plan and Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (UMP/SEIS), approved in July 2015, provides a discussion of plans for multi-use recreational trails and campsites to be established on DEC administered Forest Preserve lands, in order to connect the communities of North Hudson, Newcomb and Minerva and the support facilities within these communities. The document amended the 2005 Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest UMP, the 1995 Lake Harris Public Campground UMP and the 2000 Camp Santanoni Historic Area UMP in order to designate the community connector trails.

The eastern portion of Section 4 of the CCTP proposed multi-use trail and the bridge approaching and crossing the Palmer Pond Dam outlet are located within the Recreational River area of the Schroon River, pursuant to the Wild, Scenic and Recreational Rivers System Act (Rivers Act).

The Rivers Act, and its implementing regulations found in Part 666 of Title 6 of the Official Compilation of Codes, Rules and Regulations of the State of New York (6 NYCRR), regulates the activities within a Recreational River Area, defined geographically as the area within ½ mile from the river on both sides.

This River Area Management Plan ("Plan") has been developed to recommend specific management actions proposed to be taken to protect and enhance the river corridor resource[3], as detailed herein.

CCTP UMP/SEIS Chapter IV, Section 4, describes multi-use recreational trail Alternative A as the preferred alternative of the four trail layouts that were analyzed. Palmer Pond itself, as well as its outlet (the Branch), is a significant obstacle for a trail crossing in this area. Trail Alternative A proposes a new trail segment which will enter the parcel from the west, cross the Branch, and continue north until reaching Blue Ridge Road.

The Palmer Pond site is located south of Blue Ridge Road, west of the Adirondack Northway, wherein segments of the proposed trail and the bridge are located within the designated Schroon River Recreational River Corridor, as shown on the location map provided in Appendix 2. The river itself is located to the east of the Northway. The outlet of Palmer Pond, known as The Branch, is tributary to the Schroon River. The closest point of proposed construction, the bridge over the pond outlet, is located approximately 725 feet from the nearest point of the riverbank of the Schroon River.

Palmer Pond is a man-made impoundment, created by a DEC-owned dam on the east side of the pond. Historically, dam maintenance requiring heavy equipment has been performed by using a long boom extended from a large truck on the north side of the dam. Because of the combined need for a trail crossing in this location and better access to the dam for maintenance, an administrative motor vehicle bridge is proposed to be constructed over the outlet of Palmer Pond. On the entire north side of the outlet

[3] 6 NYCRR Section 666.7

as well as the south side up to the dam, the route will be designed to accommodate administrative motor vehicles. West of the dam, the route will be designed to Class II snowmobile trail standards in accordance with the Management Guidance.

2. Existing Conditions

The 2010 Schroon Lake Watershed Management Plan was prepared for the NYS Department of State and is hereby incorporated by reference. The Watershed Management Plan describes the 316.5 square mile watershed of Schroon Lake, including The Branch, which is tributary to the Schroon River. The report notes that The Branch (in addition to many other streams and brooks) was dammed in the days of logging, to send logs downstream to market, supply water to tanneries and operate the saw mills and grist mills that fueled the economy. The long term preventative maintenance of this dam is important to protecting not only the safety of downstream structures but also the quality of The Branch and of the Schroon River from siltation in the event of dam failure.

The Schroon Lake Watershed Management Plan includes the results of water quality studies performed on the lake and its tributaries for more than twenty years. The Watershed Management Plan describes existing conditions in the Schroon River corridor, its tributaries and the lake, including a description of natural, cultural and recreational resources, prevailing land and water uses, land ownership patterns and existing management devices.

These data indicate that Schroon Lake and its tributaries enjoy excellent water quality and water clarity. Schroon Lake is a soft water lake that possesses sufficient levels of dissolved oxygen throughout the water column to support a healthy aquatic ecosystem. Through an analysis of the phytoplankton and zooplankton communities it is known that the food web of the lake is healthy and in balance, and that the species assemblages observed in the various sample collections are reflective of the lake's excellent water quality. The pH of the lake is circum-neutral, which suggests that acid deposition is not currently a significant problem.

The Watershed Management Plan states: "The Schroon River is a highly sinuous and meandering river, and is the primary water source for Schroon Lake. Running from its origins at New Pond in Elizabethtown, the Schroon River picks up dozens of streams both large and small, and outlets at the north end of Schroon Lake. The river itself from headwater to the lake is 31.3 miles long, but when all tributary streams to the river are added, the length of the entire flowing system exceeds 260 miles. A major tributary to the Schroon River is the Paradox chain of lakes on the eastern side of the watershed, which includes Paradox Lake and Eagle Lake.

The geology and geomorphology of the river system north of Schroon Lake give the river its highly meandering nature. The river continually cuts on outside bends and deposits sediment on the inside bends. Dozens of old 'oxbow' lakes and wetlands, formed out of old cut-off meander bends, are exhibited above the inlet to the lake adjacent to the river. These conditions prevail along the majority of the river, and considerable riverbank erosion is the result. The surface geology along the river corridor is primarily a sand/silt matrix, which has low cohesiveness and is therefore highly erodible…."

“Streams within the Schroon Lake watershed are generally in excellent condition, with exceptions in areas along roadsides or development. Typical stream substrates are gravel/cobble, lending them to excellent fish propagation and habitat features. Macroinvertebrate (stream insect) populations in the streams reviewed showed high populations of pollution intolerant species such as cadis fly, mayfly and stonefly larvae. Presence of these species indicates that these streams maintain high water quality and good oxygenation throughout the year.”

The Branch and the portion of the Schroon River to which it is tributary are both classified as C(T) waters, meaning that the existing or expected best usage of these waters is for supporting fisheries and suitable for non-contact activities, and may support a trout population.

In consideration of the aesthetics of the recreational river corridor of the Schroon River, the old billboard advertising the location of Frontiertown, a tourist attraction built in the 1950’s that is now in disrepair, is within the view of paddlers on the river, as is the view of the I-87 Northway. Several dilapidated buildings associated with the tourist attraction are also visible from portions of the river. Refer to the photograph provided in Appendix 2 of the existing view from the Schroon River looking west toward the area of Palmer Pond.

Cultural resource lists and maps have been checked. The proposed activity is not in an area of identified archaeological sensitivity and no known registered, eligible or inventoried archaeological sites or historic structures were identified or documented for the project location. No further review in accordance with the State Historic Preservation Act is required.

3. Resource Management Issues

The 2010 Schroon Lake Watershed Management Plan includes current and historic management practices, a summary of land use practices and upland issues which affect the river and the lake, and an array of recommendations in Chapter 5 to protect and even improve Schroon Lake for the future. The recommendations in Chapter 5 are detailed in tables containing recommendations for in-lake improvements, general stormwater runoff systems, measures to address invasive species, specific recommendations for hamlets and highways within the watershed for development and wastewater, and streams within the watershed of the lake. The recommendations for tributaries to the Schroon River, including The Branch, include educating and outreach to streamside property owners of the benefits of maintaining vegetated buffers, consideration of required buffers for new development, addressing areas of streambank erosion, hydroseeding of bare soils and streambanks, culvert evaluation, annual review of all road ditches and banks and address as needed, de-icing alternatives and use of high-quality winter spreading equipment and training for transportation departments.

4. Alternatives Considered

Alternatives to the proposed management action include construction of a recreational trail bridge over the Northway, designation of the road shoulder of Blue Ridge Road as a recreational trail, and continuing to try to maintain the dam on Palmer Pond without

access to the south side of the dam. Due to cost, aesthetics and public safety concerns, these alternatives are not considered to be viable.

More specifically, the easternmost portion of each of the four alternatives considered for the location of the multi-use recreational trail in Chapter IV., Trail Alternatives, Section 4 of the CCTP and each of the three alternatives considered for the Palmer Pond Outlet bridge in the July 2015 CCTP, Appendix 2, "Palmer Pond Bridge Alternatives," is located within the Recreational River area of the Schroon River.

5. Proposed Goals, Objectives and Management Actions

The main objective is the protection of the recreational nature of the river resource, in the context of the presence of the interstate highway existing between the project and the river itself. The Rivers Act states[4] that recreational rivers are generally readily accessible, and may have a significant amount of development in their river areas and may have been impounded or diverted in the past. Management of recreational river areas will be directed to preserving and restoring their natural, cultural, scenic and recreational qualities.

The Department staff has proposed the location of the improvements in the river corridor area that minimizes the potential for adverse environmental impacts by avoiding wetlands, limiting the number of trees cut, avoiding steep slopes, minimizing stream crossings consistent with the Snowmobile Management Guidance and locating the bridge close to the existing interstate highway, below the sight line of moving traffic. The bridge aesthetics are mitigated by the presence of the Northway.

The preferred alternatives for the bridge, trail and Palmer Pond improvements are located near the existing highway corridors (trail alternatives proximate to Blue Ridge Road and bridge/trail proximate to the interstate highway), and allow for consolidation of the visual and noise intrusion with the existing automobile and truck traffic on the existing highways. The environmental review for the trail and bridge were conducted within the July 2015 CCTP approval process. With regard to the fishing pier, parking, boat launch and register, the Department has determined that the improvements in this specific instance will not affect the river resource. The Department has determined that with regard to the State Environmental Quality Review Act, this specific project in this specific location qualifies as a Type II action[5], indicating that the project is not anticipated to have a significant negative impact on the recreational rivers resource of the Schroon River.

The construction of forestry management roads and tributary bridges within a Recreational river area but located 150 feet or more from the bank of the designated river does not require a permit[6]. In this specific instance, the four lane I-87 Northway, with its on- and off-ramps at Exit 29 immediately east of Palmer Pond, is situated between the project site and the Schroon River.

A Rivers permit will be processed for the construction and operation of the recreational

[4] 6 NYCRR Section 666.4(c)
[5] 6 NYCRR Section 618.2(a)(3), (4), (7) and (16)
[6] 6 NYCRR Section 666.13.E.2(b)

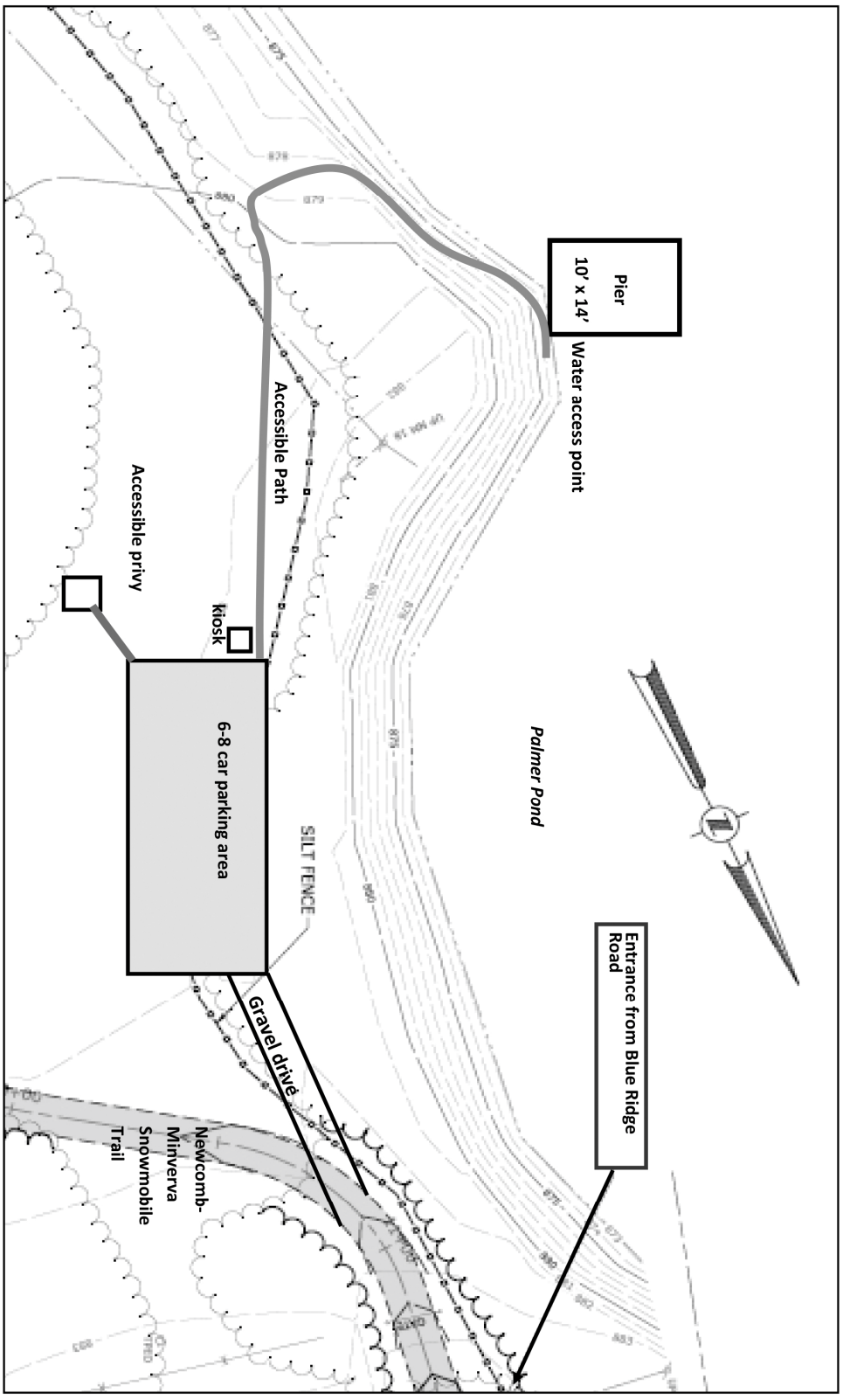
trail.[7] The Department can permit the construction of the recreational trail to a width of more than four feet, as defined by the Rivers act, and approve without a variance[8], having made the determination that the project will not impact the river resource.

With regard to the proposed accessible fishing pier, car-top boat ramp, parking and privy described in Section II., Management Recommendations, a Rivers permit[9] is required to be processed for boat launching sites and water access parking areas. In this case, the proposed improvements are located within the ½ mile Recreational Rivers area of the Schroon River, but are located more than 800 feet to the Schroon River itself, with the I-87 Northway located between the river and the project site.

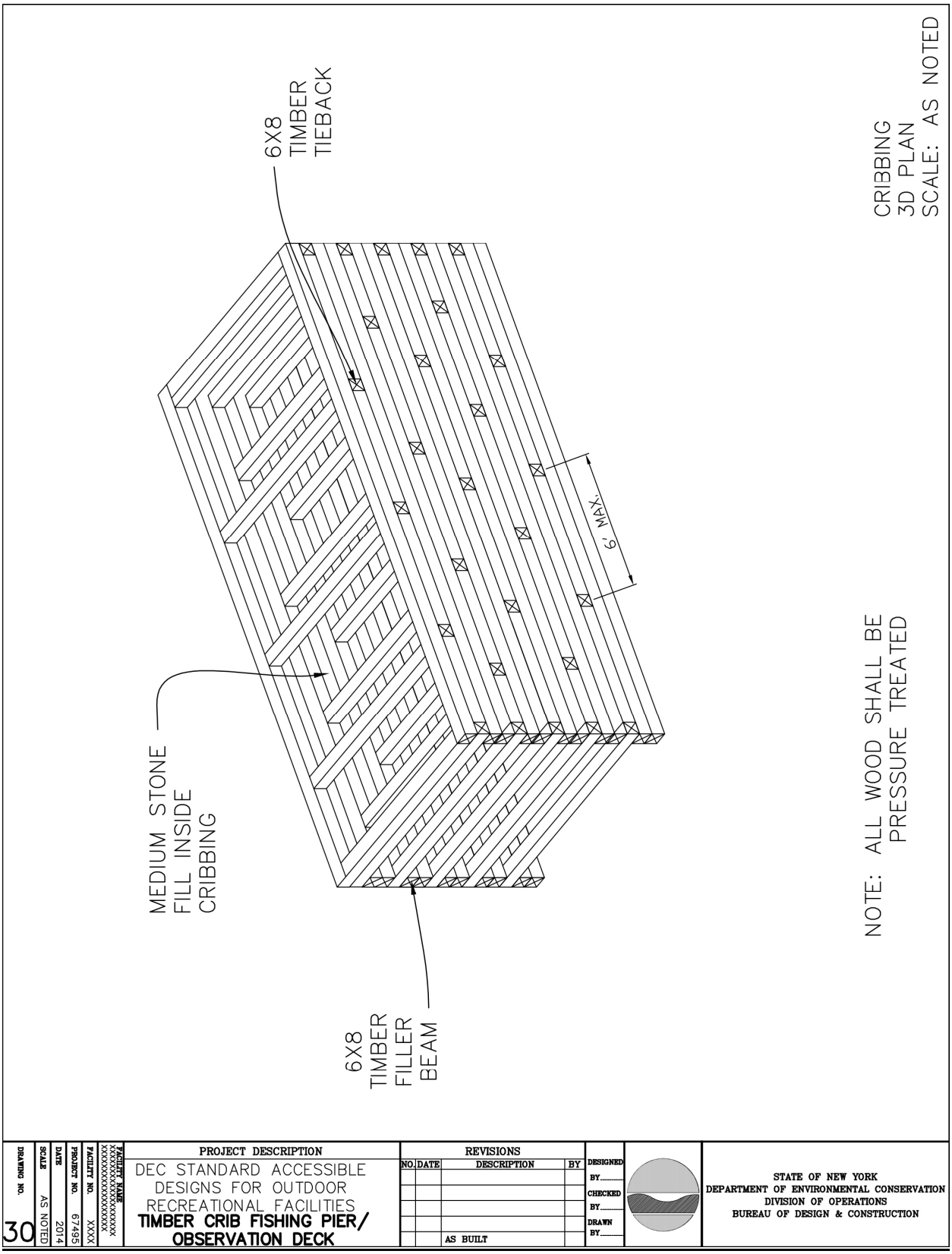
As part of the Rivers Act permitting process and in order to implement the Plan in accordance with the Rivers Act, a public hearing will be conducted on the Plan, held in or near the river area.

[7] 6 NYCRR 666.13.E.3
[8] 6 NYCRR Section 666.9(d)(1) and (2)
[9] 6 NYCRR Section 666.13.J.1.

Appendix 3: Maps and Diagrams



Site plan for Palmer Pond

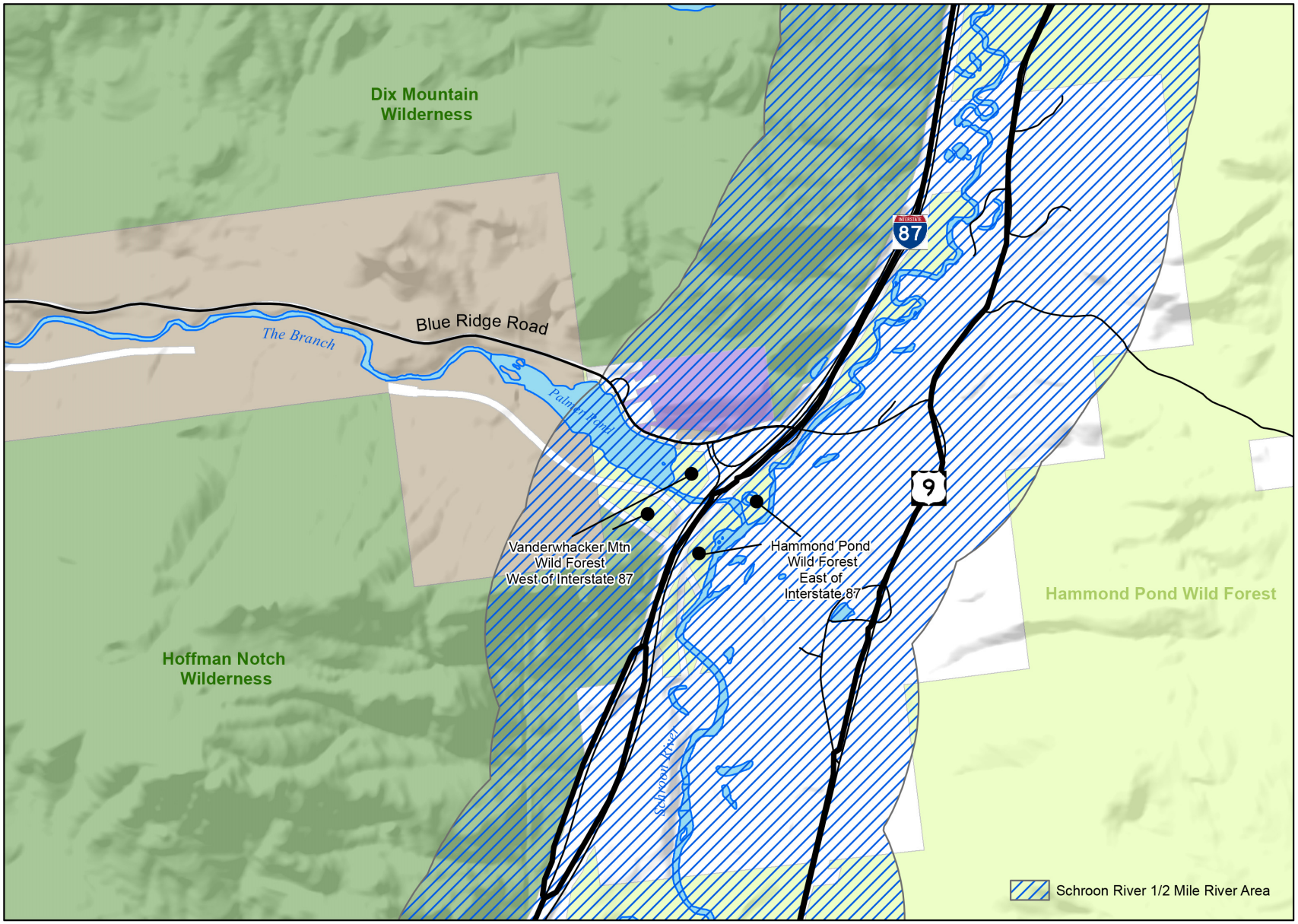


Timber crib fishing pier diagram from ADA handbook

The Schroon River near the project site

The Schroon River near the project site

Map of the Schroon River Recreational River Area



Vanderwhacker Mountain Wild Forest Schroon River Recreational River Area

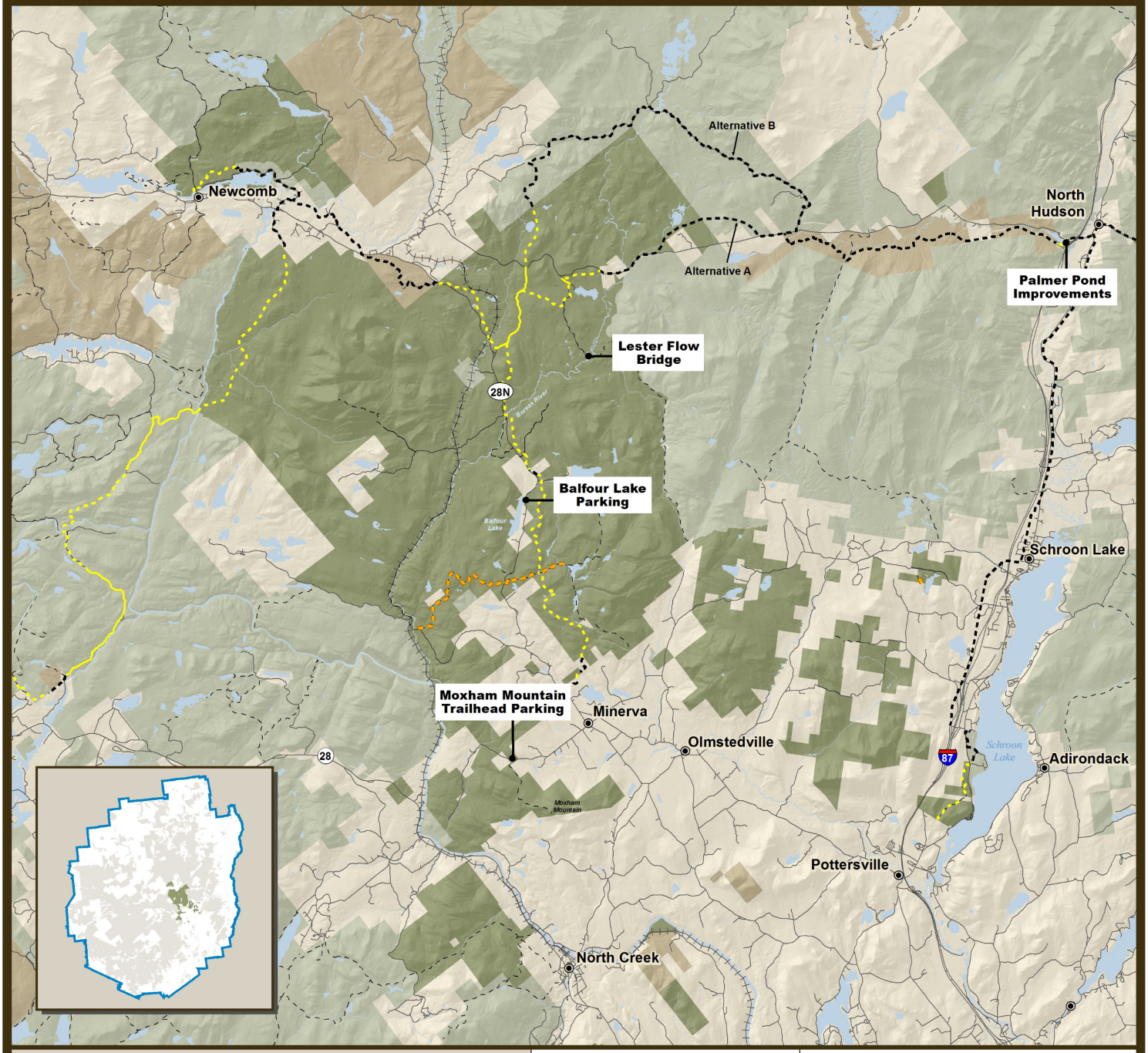
0 ¼ ½ 1 Miles

N

Adirondack Forest Preserve

Proposed Project Locations

VANDERWHACKER MOUNTAIN WILD FOREST



Approved Wild Forest Snowmobile Trails Under DEC Jurisdiction

- Class I snowmobile trail
- Class II snowmobile trail
- Snowmobile trail on Forest Preserve road

Other Proposed Snowmobile Trails

- Other Proposed Snowmobile Trails

- Vanderwhacker Mtn. Wild Forest
- Other DEC land
- DEC conservation easement
- Other road
- Other trail

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0 1 2 4 Miles

July 2016

Map produced by New York State Deptartment of Environmental Conservation, Division of Lands and Forests, Bureau of Forest Preserve Management