

# State Environmental Quality Review Act

## Final Scope

**Name of Action:** Integrated Series of Proposed State Land Management Actions in the Vicinity of Debar Mountain Complex/Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement (DGEIS)

**SEQR Status:** Type 1

**Lead Agencies:** New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and New York State Adirondack Park Agency (APA)

### I. Introduction

#### Purpose

A Draft Generic Environmental Impact Statement (DGEIS) is being prepared pursuant to the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR) to analyze the relevant areas of environmental concern resulting from the reclassification of land, in accordance with Executive Law § 816 and the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (APSLMP), and adoption of Unit Management Plans (UMPs) in the vicinity of Debar Mountain Complex (DMC).

This scoping document is intended to define the scope of information to be included in the DGEIS, to be prepared in accordance with Article 8 of the New York State Environmental Conservation Law (ECL § 8-0101 et seq.), and its implementing regulations, Part 617 of Title 6 of the Official Compilation of Codes, Rules and Regulations of the State of New York (6 NYCRR Part 617).

### II. Description of Proposed Project

#### Project Background

The Debar Mountain Complex is an 88,300-acre unit of Forest Preserve land in the northern Adirondack Park (Park) which includes the Debar Mountain Wild Forest, the Madawaska-Quebec Brook Primitive Area, and the Deer River Primitive Area. All lands in the Park are classified by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA), and all state-owned lands are described in the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (APSLMP). The APSLMP also requires DEC to prepare and adopt UMPs for all state lands in the Park. A UMP has not yet been adopted for the Debar Mountain Complex.

DEC and APA, as co-Lead Agencies, have determined that the scope of the proposed actions described below and the potential for significant adverse environmental impacts is such that a DGEIS should be prepared. This Scoping Document will identify any

potential significant impacts associated with the actions, describe the extent and quality of information needed to address the impacts, identify mitigation measures, and describe reasonable alternatives. The scoping process allows the DGEIS to be focused on the potential adverse environmental impacts of the proposed action that staff determine to be significant.

## **Project Summary**

The proposed actions in the DGEIS will include two major components:

1. The DEC proposes the adoption of UMPs for both the existing Debar Mountain Complex (DMC) and the proposed Debar Lodge Day Use Area (DLDDUA). Currently, major topics under consideration for discussion in the UMPs will include:
  - Removal of the Debar Lodge and other buildings located near Debar Pond;
  - Creation of a day-use area and recreation hub on Debar Pond at the former Debar Lodge site. This area will include two pavilions, picnic tables, grills, fireplace, parking, restrooms, foot access to Debar Pond, connections to trail networks, interpretive elements related to the site's historical past, and facilities designed to accommodate people with disabilities;
  - Improvement of the area's trail system by adding to existing trail networks, creating new trail networks, building new connector trails, and rerouting poorly located trails;
  - Improvement of access to recreation opportunities by addressing deficiencies at existing parking areas, building new parking areas, and providing better access to water bodies; and
  - Construction of new primitive tent sites and the closure of tent sites which are not in compliance with the APSLMP.
2. The APA proposes re-classification of approximately 41 acres of land from the Debar Mountain Wild Forest (DMWF) to a new day-use area, classified as Intensive Use, on the shore of Debar Pond, and changes to the APSLMP's area descriptions.

## **III. Potential Impacts and Mitigation**

- **Historic Resources**

Potential Significant Adverse Impacts: The removal of the Debar Lodge will be an adverse impact to a site on the State and National Register of Historic Places. Debar Pond Lodge is a ca. 1940 Adirondack camp located at the north end of Debar Pond, it commands a broad prospect of that body of water and the adjacent Adirondack mountain scenery that frames it. The principal building of the camp is the main lodge, a rambling two-story edifice of rustic conception

designed by architect William Distin of Saranac Lake; it is of light-frame construction with an exterior veneer of half and full round logs. In addition, a guide/caretaker house is located nearby. Several additional barns and sheds are part of the listing as well. Debar Pond Lodge is listed in the Register as reflecting the broad patterns of history (Criteria A) and as an architecturally significant property (Criteria C).

Initial List of Potential Mitigation Measures: DEC and APA are consulting with the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to review the full inventory of contributing historic structures/features associated with the Debar Lodge and explore ways to mitigate the adverse impacts caused by removal of the structure. In consultation with OPRHP, a plan will be developed to satisfactorily mitigate adverse impacts to the Debar Lodge in accordance with Section 14.09 of New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Law (State Historic Preservation Act).

Potential mitigation measures which may be developed in consultation with the OPRHP may include documentation of contributing historic features (buildings) prior to their removal, and the development of public educational materials throughout the day-use area interpreting the history of the Debar Lodge site and the land surrounding it.

- **Community Character**

The removal of Debar Lodge will also cause adverse impacts to the community character of the area, as the building has been a fixture in the local community for many decades. These impacts will be mitigated, in part, through the proposed mitigation measures related to the lodge's removal (listed above), particularly the installation of interpretive elements throughout the site. Additionally, DEC proposes to construct day-use facilities that utilize a similar design aesthetic as the current lodge, thereby minimizing the visual impact (loss of community character) caused by the lodge's removal.

#### **IV. Potential Benefits of the Proposed Action**

An adopted UMP will provide the guidance necessary for DEC staff to manage the DMWF in a manner that protects the environment while at the same time providing suitable outdoor recreation opportunities for the public. Without the development and future implementation of the UMP, sensitive environmental resources of the unit could be negatively impacted, resulting in a decrease in the public's enjoyment of such resources. Management of the unit pursuant to a UMP allows DEC to improve public use and enjoyment of the area, avoid user conflicts and prevent overuse of the resource.

The reclassification of land on the shore of Debar Pond would further contribute toward the above objectives by allowing for a higher level of public use in a small area where the potential for such use already exists. The Intensive Use classification allows for

visitor facilities and the type of management that can effectively control larger concentrations of people while preserving the natural character of the adjacent wild forest lands.

Proposals call for public interpretation of the history of the Debar Lodge site. By creating features that will exist in a similar footprint to the lodge, visitors will be able to appreciate the landscape associated with the Debar Lodge by learning the history of the site while experiencing the unique setting. The creation of these facilities and accompanying interpretive features will encourage a higher-level of visitation and appreciation of these historic elements.

## **V. Potential Impacts Not Considered Significant**

In the review of the environmental assessment form (EAF) as well as the Programmatic EIS regarding amendments to the APSLMP, potential impacts related to the following subjects were considered and determined not to be environmentally significant:

- **Wilderness and Wild Forest Resources**

The creation of the new, approximately 41-acre Intensive Use Area would reduce the acreage managed as Wild Forest in the Park. The area may experience an increase in the level of vehicle traffic due to the establishment of a new and more developed kind of day use recreation opportunity. The potential for an increase in use, if not carefully monitored and managed, could diminish the wild and tranquil setting that makes Debar Pond uniquely special.

The reclassification action provides a balanced approach to the management of the area based on the characteristics of the land and its capacity to withstand use. The new DLDUA would be managed under clear management guidelines in the Intensive Use category intended to maintain the area's relatively undeveloped character while providing a more intensive level of use in a well-defined area on the periphery of a large contiguous tract of Wild Forest land that is capable of absorbing visitation by groups on a day use basis. The new facilities proposed for the site will be developed in phases to allow for careful monitoring of site conditions while new visitation patterns are established, monitored, and evaluated. Full build-out will only occur if the monitoring effort determines that desired conditions can be maintained.

- **Fish, Wildlife, Vegetation and Habitat**

Several potential impacts were considered including damage or disturbance to vegetation and habitat caused by trail construction; disturbance to wildlife by trail users; and impacts to rare, threatened or endangered species, and significant natural communities during facility construction.

Trees and other vegetation will need to be removed for the construction of facilities, such as trails and parking areas, however such removal will be

localized to the immediate project site. Natural revegetation will be allowed to occur where temporary vegetation removal was necessary for construction purposes. Consistent with recreational activities in other locations, localized vegetation loss is expected along trails and within primitive tent sites but is not considered significant overall.

DEC and APA have used existing natural resource information, Natural Heritage biologists and databases, and existing reports documenting the locations of rare, threatened, or endangered species in order to examine the potential impacts of operational and construction activities in the DMWF and have determined that potential impacts to these resources are not significant.

DEC wildlife and fisheries staff have also been consulted and conclude that impacts to wildlife and fisheries will not be significant. While recreation may cause minor displacement of some wildlife species, it is not anticipated to effect wildlife populations overall. The timing of construction activities can be controlled, if necessary, so that nesting/breeding periods of relevant wildlife species are not impacted. Public education, with signs and kiosks, about adjacent significant natural communities, or wildlife nesting areas, and the need for protection of such places, can also be implemented.

- **Climate Change**

New York State agencies are committed to ensuring all programs consider the future physical risks from climate change in order to protect New Yorkers and our environment. Under the 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, New York State committed to eliminating greenhouse gas emissions in the state and to ultimately achieve net zero emissions. The Act extends and enhances a number of New York's successful clean energy initiatives to accelerate the development of wind and solar power, increase energy efficiency, and facilitate the growth of energy storage technology.

In accordance with Section 7 of the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, the management actions proposed in the GIES will take climate change, greenhouse gas emissions, and the 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act into consideration. However, DEC and APA do not anticipate significant adverse impacts to air resources due to project construction or public use resulting in the implementation of the UMPs. Several potential impacts will be considered including the reduction in air quality due to continued snowmobile use and a potential increase in motor vehicle use, and acceleration of CO<sup>2</sup> emissions due to a potential increase in fossil fuel combustion from these activities.

Additionally, DEC and APA do not anticipate an increase in snowmobile use and have determined that any potential increase in motor vehicle use will not cause a significant impact to air quality or CO<sup>2</sup> emissions.

- **Land**

Proposed trails, parking areas, primitive tent sites, lean-tos, and a day-use area will need to be constructed. Additionally, the Debar Lodge is proposed to be removed. These activities will require localized modifications to the landscape and will cause short-term impacts in the form of soil disturbance but are not expected to create long-term adverse impacts.

- **Geologic Features**

The DMC contains geologic features such as rocky mountain summits and eskers, as well as cliffs that are of interest to the rock-climbing community. APA and DEC expect short-term impacts to these features when trails are constructed. Public use on and near these features may also cause small, localized impacts but are not considered significant.

- **Surface Water**

Some of the construction required to implement the UMPs will have the potential for causing short term erosion while the soil is disturbed. Best management practices will be employed during construction to minimize impacts such as erosion and sedimentation into nearby wetlands and waterbodies. Some facilities are proposed to be located near wetlands and waterbodies but impacts will be minimized by siting them in a manner that prevents erosion and sedimentation into water resources by either 1) leaving a vegetated barrier between facilities and the water and/or 2) selectively and minimally hardening surfaces where significant human activity is anticipated, such as the proposed Debar Lodge Day Use Area.

- **Flooding**

Some of the recreational facilities proposed in the UMPs, particularly trails, will be located in areas that experience seasonal and/or temporary flooding. Adverse impacts to these facilities and to water resources will be minimized by designing these facilities to withstand this type of flooding by using trail-hardening techniques that rely on natural materials from surrounding areas and that blend in the with surrounding environment as much as possible.

- **Open Space and Recreation**

It is anticipated that the UMPs will propose the closure of facilities, such as trails and primitive tent sites, that are degraded, poorly sited, or no longer used. These closures may impact recreationists that prefer these specific facilities; however, this impact will be mitigated by the creation of additional facilities throughout the unit that create a net gain in overall recreational opportunities.

- **Noise**

The construction of parking areas and the removal of the Debar Lodge will require the use of heavy construction equipment. Impacts from the noise emitted by this equipment will be minimized due to the short-term nature of these activities.

- **Scenic Resources**

In addition to being an important historic resource with local significance, Debar Lodge and the surrounding landscape are a defining feature of the Debar Management Complex that helps shape the identity of the region. Removal of the camp or excessive recreational development in the area threatens to negatively impact the wild and unconfined scenic resources of the site, along with the historic character of the great camp.

The proposal to reconfigure the site into a Day Use area has been undertaken with careful consideration given to how the facility would uphold and respect the unique historic character of the lodge and the human history of the site. Design details will include the repurposing of certain components of the lodge, and the footprint of existing buildings will be carefully repurposed to assure that site disturbance and vegetation removal is minimized wherever possible. New structures will be designed to reflect the aesthetic of the historic lodge, and motor vehicle access will be planned in a manner that minimizes earth disturbance and the possibility of visual impacts observed from the water.

- **Local Economy**

The recreation and tourism industry is one of the key elements of the Adirondack economy, and its continued importance is dependent upon protecting the quality of public lands in the Park. The Debar Mountain Management Complex is easily accessible from a collection of larger communities surrounding it such as Malone, Saranac Lake, and Plattsburgh. A significant number of visitors come to the area from Quebec and Ontario where larger communities are just across the Canadian border.

Evaluation of the potential impacts suggests that the proposed actions would benefit the local economy and would likely improve visitation to the area as the result of improved management for the area.

## **VI. Alternatives**

The alternatives analysis section of the DGEIS will examine several alternatives for the removal of Debar Lodge. This analysis will discuss different alternatives and a “no action” alternative.

Classification alternatives could include reclassification of the land surrounding the Debar Lodge as Intensive Use, Historic or State Administrative, or could include different boundaries to delineate the reclassification area. The "No Action" alternative would leave the lands as Wild Forest. Wilderness, Primitive and Canoe classifications are not being considered because the size and characteristics of the land do not meet the criteria for those classifications.

Information on the potential beneficial and adverse environmental impacts associated with each option will be presented. This section will provide a clear and thorough explanation of the alternatives and explain why the recommended alternative is the most appropriate choice.

- **Intensive Use**

An Intensive Use alternative could accommodate the proposed day use area or a campground. The APSLMP requires that "[a]ny request for classification of a new acquisition or reclassification of existing lands from another land use category to an intensive use area will be accompanied by a draft unit management plan for the proposed intensive use area that will demonstrate how the applicable guidelines will be respected." APSLMP at 42.

**Intensive Use/ Campground:** Reclassify the Debar Lodge site as an Intensive Use area with a small campground. The closest private campground is located approximately 7.5 miles away, and the closest public campground is 12 miles away. The site is easily accessible from County route 26, and power is available at the site. Soils and Slopes on the site are generally conducive to this type of development.

**Intensive Use/ Day Use Area:** Reclassify the Debar Lodge site as an Intensive Use area with a Day Use Area. The SLMP provides for several ways that Day Use Areas may serve the recreating public. The character of the Debar Lodge site makes it an appealing destination for public gatherings in a natural setting. The closest DEC Day Use Area is within the Meacham Lake Campground 12 miles away. Soils and Slopes on the site are generally conducive to this type of development.

- **Historic**

Reclassify an area around the Debar Lodge to Historic Area classification under the State Land Master Plan. The primary management guideline for historic areas is to preserve the quality and character of the historic resources. If reclassified as an historic area, the Debar Lodge and supporting structures would continue to be maintained in a manner that preserves their historic character. Public use and access to the site would also be carried out in a manner where historic preservation was the primary objective.

- **Administrative**

An administrative classification would allow use of the Debar lodge for "a variety of specific state purposes that are not primarily designed to accommodate visitors." APSLMP at 46. The APSLMP provides that "[t]he primary management guideline for



state administrative areas should be to provide facilities for the administration of state lands or programs in a setting and on a scale that is, to the greatest extent feasible, in harmony with the relatively wild and undeveloped character of the Adirondack Park." The Debar Lodge could be used as a ranger station or a facility for administering state lands, similar to the headquarters buildings at Little Tupper Lake, which were formerly part of a private camp.

The APSLMP Intensive Use Guidelines also require that:

All state administrative facilities should be located, designed and managed so as to blend with the Adirondack environment and to have the minimum adverse impact possible on surrounding state lands and nearby private holdings. Whenever possible, such facilities should be adjacent to or serviceable from existing public road systems within the Park.

Construction and development activities in state administrative areas should:

- avoid material alterations of wetlands;
- minimize extensive topographical alterations;
- limit vegetative clearing; and,
- preserve the scenic, natural and open space resources of the state administrative area.

APSLMP at 47. The Debar Lodge is a log structure located near the shore of Debar Pond. The building is accessible on a short spur road from County Route 26, an existing public road. There are several outbuildings which could be used to store equipment and vehicles, if needed. Use of the existing buildings for administrative purposes would not require alterations of wetlands or topography or require extensive tree cutting. The use of log in the exterior of the lodge serves to blend the building with the natural environment. The retention of trees around the lodge and the view of the Pond from the lodge could be found to preserve the scenic, natural and open spaces of the area, as required by the APSLMP.

Lastly, additions to the state administrative category should come either from new acquisitions or from the reclassification of appropriate wild forest or intensive use areas. APSLMP at 47. The Debar Lodge and surrounding lands are currently classified as Wild Forest.

In conclusion, the Debar Lodge would be eligible for a State Administrative classification if there was a need for administrative facilities at that location.

- **Alternative Boundaries**

An alternative reclassification area could be considered. The 41-acre area that is proposed to be reclassified as Intensive Use is delineated to include the existing development at the Debar Lodge site as well as the area along an existing powerline

and road that accesses the site from County Route 26. This reclassification area was designed specifically to accommodate the proposed DLDUA.

There are other boundaries that could be considered for a proposed Intensive Use area. A different configuration may also be appropriate when considering potential alternative classifications.

- **No Action**

SEQR regulations require an assessment of the “no action” alternative. In this case, the no action alternative would be defined as the Agency taking no immediate procedural steps to review provisions of the State Land Master Plan. Under this alternative, non-conforming, existing facilities inside the boundary of the Complex would be removed.

## **VII. Attachments to Accompany DGEIS**

The following elements will be included as attachments to the DGEIS:

**Attachment 1:** Map of Proposed Reclassification of Lands in the Vicinity of Debar Lodge Within the Debar Mountain Wild Forest

**Attachment 2:** Proposed Draft Unit Management Plan for the Debar Mountain Complex *(Including a Draft Unit Management Plan for the Debar Lodge Day Use Area)*