

A quest to save N.Y.'s forests

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It hardly requires a trek to the Adirondacks to either behold the stunning landscapes and geological treasures of New York, or to applaud the efforts to keep rural and rugged environments just as they are.

The best news, so early in a new year, on that front comes right in our own backyard. Some 196,000 acres in eastern Rensselaer County could be

preserved under a federally funded, state-supervised program to protect forest land -- especially in the Northeast and industrial Midwest -- from an all too rapid conversion to nonforest use.

The land, known as the Rensselaer Plateau, is a 20-mile wide stretch just west of the Taconic Range marked by its steep escarpment, with elevations reaching 1,800 feet. It was never very good for farming. The development that occurred a century or so ago all but wiped out what today is New York's fifth-largest contiguous forest. The timber was used for making charcoal, a fuel that powered Troy's long-gone iron industries.

What's there now -- wetlands, watershed and wildlife habitats -- ought to stay that way. With the plateau now designated a U.S. Forest Service Forest Legacy Area, the state can seek federal funds to help pay private landowners who are willing to sell either their land or the development rights to it to protect the rural nature of a portion of the county that encompasses all or part of 10 small towns -- Berlin, Brunswick, Grafton, Hoosick, Nassau, Petersburg, Pittstown, Poestenkill, Sand Lake and Stephentown.

Obviously, this is not the more populated or commercially viable part of Rensselaer County, farther west and even closer to the Hudson River and nearby highways. The assets that need to be preserved in the Rensselaer Plateau are different.

Foremost, perhaps, is the Tomhannock Reservoir watershed, the source of drinking water for more than 100,000 people.

Then there are the recreational uses -- hiking, mountain biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, hunting, fishing and paddling among them -- so important to the local economy.

Finally there's the wildlife that make the Rensselaer Plateau as inviting as just about any remote place in the state. There are moose, black bear, fisher, otter and bobcat.




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All might long prosper, too -- both the people and the animals in their midst -- thanks to a voluntary land preservation program.

The issue:

The Rensselaer Plateau is part of a federal land protection program.

The Stakes:

Everything from the watershed to wildlife to recreational offerings will be better off.

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