

Former Bowater lands now open to ATVs

225,000 hectares of woods and lakes now public

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Provincial conservation officers will patrol the area and ATV groups will also work to ensure their members obey the restrictions. (The Canadian Press)

Thirteen gates have been opened to allow vehicle access to 1,700 kilometres of forestry land previously owned by Bowater Mersey in Nova Scotia.

The provincial government says lakes, streams and woods in the area have always been accessible on foot or by paddling but motorized vehicles have been banned from the areas for the last 10 years.

Ecologically sensitive areas remain off-limits for vehicles. That's good news for Ray Plourde of the Ecology Action Centre.

"We represent the environmental perspective, I guess but the reality is that we're all Nova Scotians and all Nova Scotians paid for this land. It's awfully hard for us to say, 'No, only hikers and walkers should go on this land.' It is owned by everybody and so government has a difficult job to balance things," said Plourde.

"When we saw the maps today, we were persuaded by those maps to see that the important ecological areas are not going to be used by motor vehicles and off-highway vehicles ... As long as that's what occurs here, then we should all be good. If not then enforcement is going to have to crack down."

The province bought more than 220,000 hectares of forest land in southwest Nova Scotia in December.

Natural Resources Minister Charlie Parker has said all-terrain vehicles will only be able to use designated roads in the area for recreational purposes.

Provincial conservation officers will patrol the area and ATV groups will also work to ensure their members obey the restrictions.

"We will have a checkpoint set up somewhere here strategically, and those checkpoints will rotate. So we have a lot of staff dedicated. As well, our helicopters will be called in if needed," said John Mombourquette, director of law enforcement for the Department of Natural Resources.

Just under half of the road system is still off-limits. Some residents still have a few concerns.

"We're kind of concerned with the trucks and the cars are going to be allowed back here. Is that going to create a little bit of fast driving with cars? Is it going to create garbage drop offs?" said ATV rider Gerry Boudreau.