

Due Process at the State Forest

After years of idling in neutral while Island public safety officials urged action to address the fire hazard represented by the Manuel F. Correllus State Forest, the state Department of Environmental Management lurched suddenly into high gear last week and began bulldozing the forest's protective firebreaks. This work is being undertaken with permits issued by the state Department of Fisheries and Wildlife. But significantly, the widening of firebreaks is being done without benefit of the formal review process laid out for such projects by the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act.

Before acronym soup causes your eyes to glaze over, let's consider a few basic principles here. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has many agencies, and they may sometimes seem to be at cross-purposes, but at the end of the day they all serve the public interest. And there is nothing impossible about dealing with the fire hazard in the state forest while also protecting the twenty-six rare species that call the forest home. The state requires every citizen, every business and indeed every government agency proposing work on the scale of the state forest project to undergo a process that begins with the filing of an Environmental Notification Form and allows thirty days for public comment.

It's hardly good form for a state agency, after years of inaction, suddenly to cite an emergency clause in state regulations as an excuse to dispense with this process of public review. We're as eager as the Island fire chiefs, all of whom support this clearing of firebreaks, to see the state forest fire threat addressed. And it's possible that the process of public review might lead to the conclusion that the agency's plan for widening the firebreaks is, in fact, the best way to proceed. But we'd far rather see our state government err on the side of honoring its own process than do an end-run around it, as seems to be the case in this instance.