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[Judge puts Plum Creek on hold](#)

A Superior Court ruling faults LURC commissioners and reorders hearings to reopen.

The Associated Press

PORTLAND — A state judge on Thursday put a stop to Plum Creek Timber Co.'s sprawling resort and residential development in the Moosehead Lake region, citing missteps by the regulatory agency that gave approval to what would be the largest development of its kind in Maine.

Superior Court Justice Thomas Humphrey took issue with the way the Land Use Regulation Commission handled parts of its deliberations, saying LURC failed to follow proper administrative procedures and engaged in what amounted to "an unauthorized, ad hoc procedure."

The case now goes back to the state agency for further proceedings.

Lisa Pohlmann, executive director of the Natural Resources Council of Maine, applauded the judge's ruling. She said Maine people were deprived of their right to speak out about the final version of the development plan.

"This decision is important because people throughout Maine and across the country have strong concerns about the final Plum Creek application, and were deprived an opportunity to voice those concerns directly to the commission," Pohlmann said Thursday in a statement.

Plum Creek declined comment on the judge's decision, issued in West Bath. "At this time we are reviewing the judge's decision," said spokesman Mark Doty.

Plum Creek's proposal was approved in September 2009, nearly five years after the Seattle-based company announced it would seek to rezone nearly 400,000 acres of land.

From the start, Plum Creek encountered strong criticism from environmental and conservation groups. Critics contend the large-scale development would threaten the character of the North Woods, Maine's vast wilderness where Henry David Thoreau tromped in the 1800s.

The final development called for 821 house lots as well as two resorts with more than 1,200 housing units — houses, hotel rooms or condominiums — at Big Moose Mountain and Lilly Bay.

Plum Creek pointed out that the development was limited to 16,900 of the 400,000 acres, and that it planned to donate or sell conservation easements on 363,000 acres where public access would be guaranteed and future residential development would be prohibited.

The lawsuit challenging LURC's approval of the development was brought by the Natural Resources Council of Maine, Forest Ecology Network and Restore: The North Woods.

But environmental and conservation groups weren't unified, with some supporting the overall project because of the conservation easements that were negotiated with Plum Creek.

"We still believe that the overall conservation outcomes of Plum Creek's final plan are a tremendous opportunity for the people of Maine," said Mike Tetreault, Maine executive director of the Nature Conservancy.

Maine Conservation Commissioner William Beardsley had even stronger words, calling the judge's decision a "tragedy."

"I see more poverty and fewer job opportunities in Maine's fragile rural economies if this decision stands. I see a loss of (nearly) 400,000 acres of conservation easements, an area twice the size of Baxter State Park," he said.