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NY state-owned Revolutionary War battlefield park being eyed as possible national park

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ALBANY, N.Y. — When the force of 1,200 British redcoats, loyalists and American Indians finally made a stand against the 5,000-strong Continental Army pushing its way into Iroquois country in the summer of 1779, the two sides fought a running battle along the Chemung River Valley near present-day Elmira.

Today, a state park occupies the hill where much of the fighting occurred on Aug. 29, 1779. But Newtown Battlefield State Park only covers some 300 acres of the rolling, wooded landscape where the two forces fought, and there's a proposal in Congress to look into whether neighboring land needs to be protected for its historical significance and possibly wrapped into a new national park.

The proposal was included in legislation introduced earlier this month by U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-NY. Her measure would authorize the federal government to conduct a study into the benefits of having the Newtown Battlefield and parcels bordering the state park included in the national park system. Gillibrand said such a move would protect areas outside the state park that were part of the original battleground, which covered about 2,100 acres spread over what is now mostly private property in the towns of Elmira, Chemung and Ashland, along the Pennsylvania border 160 miles southwest of Albany.

"New York is known for her history, and this designation would attract more tourism for the area and strengthen our commitment to preserving our landmarks," Gillibrand said in a news release announcing introduction of her legislation on Aug. 2.

Paul Perine and his fellow history buffs gathered last weekend at the Newtown Battlefield for their annual Revolutionary War battle re-enactment. While Perine and other re-enactors say they favor protecting the land outside the park where the battle was fought, they don't necessarily want to see the state site taken over by the National Parks Service.

That's because federal rules forbid battle re-enactments from being staged on NPS property. Musket and canon firing demonstrations and encampments of re-enactors are allowed, but massed ranks of people blazing away at one another with blank cartridges is prohibited, NPS officials said.

"We would probably lose the ability to do what our mission is," said Perine, the acting president of the Chemung Valley Living History Society.

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