



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
The State of Minnesota

State Office Building, Room G95 100 Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. Saint Paul, Minnesota 55155

April 8, 2016

Mark Liedl
Land Services Director
Crow Wing County
322 Laurel Street, Suite 11
Brainerd, MN 56401

Re: Mississippi River Northwoods Recreation Trail designation & Mississippi Northwoods Habitat Complex Protection – ML 2012, Ch. 264, Art. 1, Sec. 2, Subd. 3(b)

Dear Mr. Liedl:

Please accept this letter as “written comment” with respect to the Mississippi River Northwoods (MRNW) Recreation Trail designation with specific regard to the proposal to designate, as multi-use, 11.5 miles of existing trails within the MRNW.

While reviewing the related press release, proposed trail designation application summary and proposed trail designation document, several questions arise with the overall designation application and review.

- 1. “11.5 miles of existing forest trails within 2,000 acres of Crow Wing County managed public forestland commonly known as the MRNW area”.** On March 13, 2015, you testified before the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC) that there were approximately 21 miles of roads and trails upon the MRNW property and that approximately 10 miles were 10 feet wide or greater. A 3/9/2015 map provided at the council meeting from Crow Wing County listed the “existing forest trails = 19.6 mi.” while a 9/30/2015 letter from Land Services Supervisor Kirk Titus stated the MRNW property “contained over 25 miles of existing forest roads and trails.” In contrast, the Proposed Trail Designation Application Summary defines “35 miles of forest trails within the 2,000 acres.” Please provide clarification as to how many miles of trails are currently on the MRNW property. The four different trail numbers are difficult to follow and it would be most helpful if you could develop a table or diagram of the miles of trails for the LSOHC. Further, could the county share how many miles will be maintained under the county program and what designation the trails will hold in the county program. It would be most helpful if you could give an assurance to the council that no new trails will be constructed (per Kirk Titus 9/30/2015 letter) if that is what is intended.
- 2. “The proposed designation occurs on trails with existing motorized use and includes no plans to develop new trails.”** Your 3/13/2015 testimony before the LSOHC indicated that under county forest status all trails are open to motorized use. You further stated it was the County’s objective to move toward a more managed system of trails. The trail designation at hand appears to lend toward that objective for the proposed 11.5 miles of trails, however it appears that possibly the remaining 23.5 miles of trails will remain without designation of any kind and thus could be open to unfettered motorized use under county forest guidelines. This could then

generate the question “are the entire 35 miles of trails currently open to motorized use?” If so, does the county plan restrictions on the remaining 23.5 miles?

3. **“The proposed designation will also enhance access to hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities available on the land”.** The words “enhance access” also need a little more explanation or clarification depending on what the number of miles are and their designation especially in light of the proposed designation that trails would be open to motorized recreation use from May 1 thru October 31 after which the trails would be closed to motorized recreation riding from November 1 through April 30 as per the County’s Forest Resources Plan. It appears that other than the “designation” of the trails, there is no change to current County Forest Resource Plan procedures. Please help bring an understanding as to what will increase access and protect the resource?

4. **“Trail Linkages and Networks – Linkages to existing trails.”** It is indicated that “the applicant desires to connect this proposal with other local multiple-use trails and cities including the Southern Loop ATV Trail, the Biller Black Bear Area Trail, and the City of Brainerd.” In the current case, and in potential reality, the negative impact upon the MRNW property from a wildlife habitat perspective could be definite. The question as to the degree of impact will depend upon the amount of increased traffic. What steps might be taken to “protect, restore and enhance” and to deter any detrimental impacts? Some thought needs to occur on how to measure improved habitat or detrimental impact to habitat. Such could put the county in a position of having to reimburse the OHF for compensation for the detrimental impacts to habitat (MS 97A.056, Subd. 15) should improvement not occur.

Access and public use of OHF purchased land is an expected and a desired outcome of fee-title acquisitions. However, constitutionally those acquisitions must function as habitat. It is in concern for that habitat that these questions are raised.

It is my understanding that the next step within the County’s Recreation Trail Proposal and Planning Process, after this 30-day public comment period, is presenting the Trail Project Brief to the Citizens Natural Resource Advisory Committee. When that step is taken, I would greatly appreciate being notified so I may have the opportunity to provide testimony to the committee on behalf of the LSOHC.

Respectfully,



Bob Anderson
Chair, Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Enclosure

CC: Crow Wing County Board Members
MN DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr
LSOHC Members

**Mississippi River Northwoods Trail
PROPOSED TRAIL DESIGNATION APPLICATION SUMMARY**

**Township 46 Range 30 (Oak Lawn Township) sections 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, & 35
Township 45 Range 29 (Oak Lawn Township) section 3**

Crow Wing County Land Services

March 16, 2016

Summary of Trail Proposal:

On November 5th, 2014, the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club submitted a “Recreation Trail Development and Improvement Request” to designate, as multiple use recreation trails, 11.5 miles of the existing 35 miles of forest trails within 2,000 acres of Crow Wing County managed public forestland commonly known as the Mississippi River Northwoods (MRNW) area. The proposed designation occurs on trails with existing motorized use and includes no plans to develop new trails, widen existing trails, or change existing uses. Historically, the MRNW area has been open to motorized use while providing recreational access for hunting and fishing as well many other uses for many years.

If approved by both Crow Wing County and the State of Minnesota, maintenance of this existing, but currently undesignated multiuse trail segment would be paid for through the MN DNR Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Grant-In-Aid (GIA) program and the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club. One trail head parking area is proposed, located approximately 1/2 mile north of State Highway #210. The proposed designation would be open to motorized recreation use from May 1st thru October 31st. Consistent with state law, ATV use for purposes of big game hunting will be allowed, including off-trail riding for purposes of retrieving a deer or installing a portable deer stand.

Scope of Project:

The proposed trail designation encompasses 11.5 miles of more than 35 miles of existing motorized roads and trails within the county managed public forestland bordering the Mississippi River. Currently all existing trails are open for multiple uses. The proposal includes no plans to develop new trails, widen existing trails, or change existing uses. No parts of the proposed designated recreational trail run on a local, county, or state public road right-of-way.

Summary of Trail Purpose and Intended Uses:

This proposal would achieve the Crow Wing County Board’s stated policy goals of achieving “diverse recreational opportunities that are accessible to people of all ages and abilities, while preserving the County’s high quality natural areas and open space.” And, it has been evaluated by professional County natural resource managers consistent with the process identified in the Crow Wing County Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan that was approved by the County board on February 14, 2012. Designated uses on trail segments may include licensed highway vehicles, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), off-highway motorcycles (OHMs), and all forms of non-motorized recreation uses. Off-Road Vehicles (ORVs) will not be allowed on any part of the proposed recreation trail system.

Proposed Trail Development Plan:

The following steps will be taken prior to official recognition as a GIA funded recreation trail system:

- 1.) Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club secures local government unit sponsor (Crow Wing County).
- 2.) Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club obtains GIA funding through the State of Minnesota to develop and maintain a recreation trail on county administered lands.
- 3.) Crow Wing County issues the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club the trail permit.
- 4.) Trail surfaces on existing forest trails within the trail system are rehabilitated (i.e., hardened, shaped, graded, etc.) to a sustainable and safe condition by the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club.
- 5.) Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club installs appropriate safety and regulatory signage as per “Forest Access Signing and Placement Guidelines (2005)”. Also, the club will install amenities at picnic and parking areas (i.e., grills, picnic tables).
- 6.) Crow Wing County Land Services and the Minnesota DNR create brochures and other paper and electronic literature for trail use (i.e., safety, informational, advertising).
- 7.) Mississippi River Northwoods Trail officially recognized as a GIA recreation trail system and has statewide significance as such.

Trail Signage Plan:

The County will utilize the MN DNR signage guidelines as identified in the “Forest Access Signing and Placement Guidelines (2005)”. Safety and regulatory signage will provide useful and necessary information to trail users. The information kiosk at the trail head will inform users about safe, responsible, and legal recreation trail use practices.

All trails will be identified for the intended uses to ensure users have a safe experience and the natural resources are protected.

All posts, hardware, and signs will be paid for by GIA funding and the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club. Signs will be provided by the MN DNR. All signs will be installed by the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club.

Enforcement:

Currently, both the Crow Wing County Sherriff’s Office and DNR Conservation Officers respond to and enforce violations in the Mississippi River Northwoods area. The Sheriff’s Office receives funds to monitor County recreation ATV use from the Off-Highway Vehicle Safety Enforcement Grant provided by the State of Minnesota. If the proposed recreation trail is approved by Crow Wing County and receives GIA funding, it will be periodically patrolled by Conservation Officers and the Sherriff’s Office based on trail user counts and incidences reported. Also, the Minnesota DNR’s Trail Ambassador’s Program will be initiated. Ambassador volunteers are responsible for greeting fellow outdoor enthusiasts, educating trail users, giving minor aid in emergencies, and providing useful information about responsible OHV use on public lands. Additionally, Ambassadors provide valuable trail user data to the County and State. An information kiosk at the proposed trail head will inform trail users about safe, responsible, and legal recreation trail use practices. As part of the

Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan’s “Trail Monitoring and Enforcement Plan”, the proposed recreation trail will be tracked on an annual basis by the Sherriff’s Department for recreation related complaints and incidents. Also, on a weekly basis, Crow Wing County will review Conservation Officer reports from the Minnesota DNR. And, as per the Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan, a number of other measurables will be tracked on the proposed trail including:

- Review of Trail Ambassador Reports
- Meetings with DNR and enforcement partners regarding trail management coordination
- Tracking of Public Feedback and Trail User Comments
- Specialized Seasonal Trail Enforcement
- Grant-in-Aid (GIA) Trail Maintenance Agreements and Management
- Specialized Seasonal Trail Monitoring

Based on the monitoring information generated from those reports and meetings, Crow Wing County will re-align, make use changes, or temporarily or permanently close portions of the trail at any time.

Proposed Trail Maintenance Plan:

NOTE: All maintenance will be performed by the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club.

April – October: Trails are monitored and cleared of deadfall and debris as needed.

July - September: Where necessary, trails are mowed to improve visibility and reduce fire hazards.

May – October: Signage is inspected and/or replaced for user safety and enjoyability.

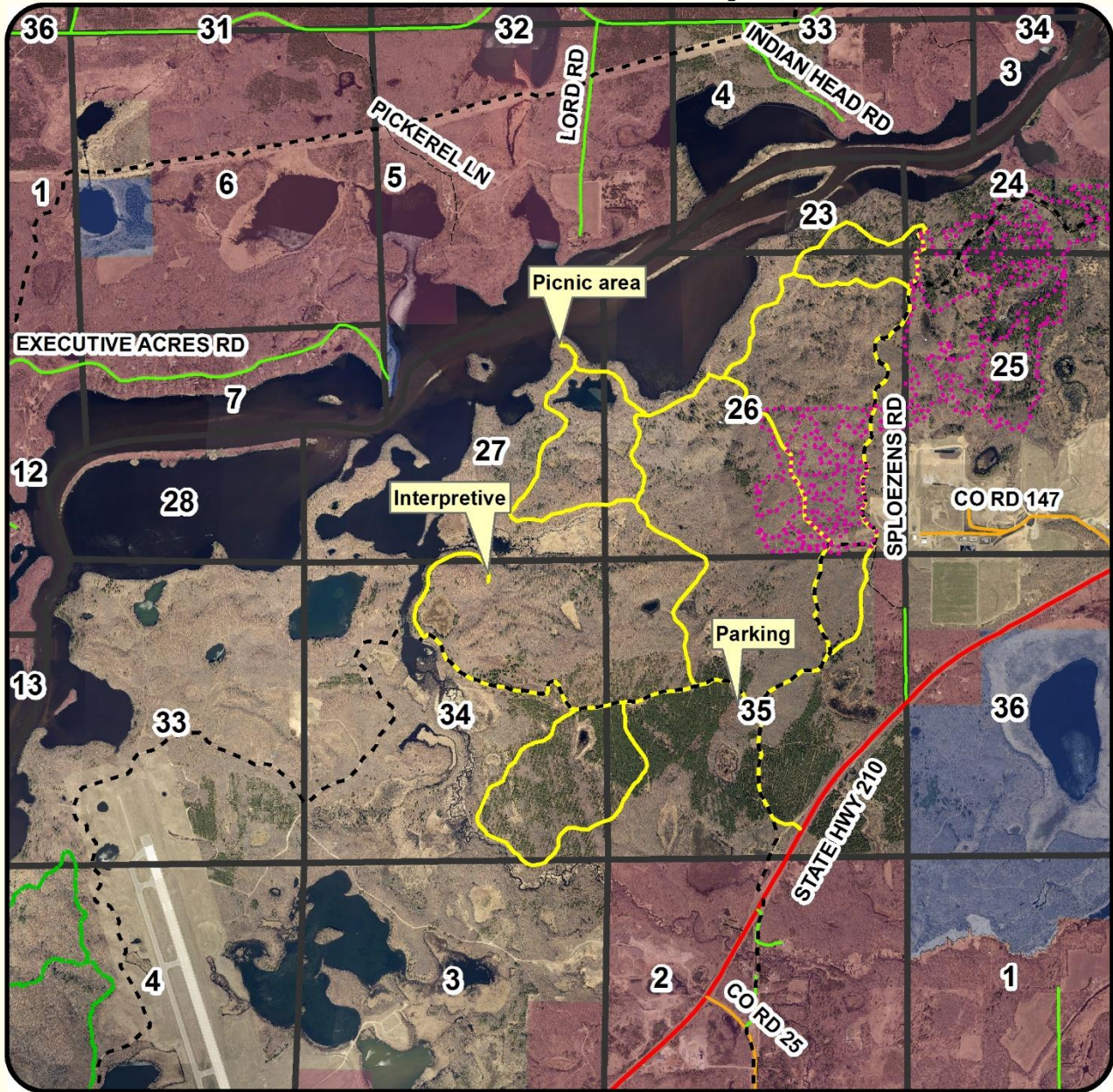
May – October: General maintenance and monitoring of the trail surface including blading, grading, dust control, and/or resurfacing as needed.

The proposed trail maintenance plan schedule is identified below:

Trail Maintenance Plan Schedule *(ie. mowing, dust control, clearing, signage, blading etc.)*

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Clearing				X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Mowing							X		X			
Signage					X	X	X	X	X	X		
General Maintenance					X	X	X	X	X	X		

Mississippi River Northwoods Trail Recreation Trail Proposal



0 1,100 2,200 4,400 Feet



Legend

- Northwoods Trail Proposal
- Existing Designated Recreation Trails**
- Type**
- - - Cross Country Skiing
- - - OHM
- - - Snowmobile
- Sections
- County
- Private
- State (DNR)

1 inch equals 0.49 miles

Crow Wing County
Public Land Management
322 Laurel Street, Suite #12

For non-legal, reference use only

6/17/2015

Crow Wing County Coordinates (projection) ArcGIS 10.1

218-824-1115

**Mississippi River Northwoods
PROPOSED TRAIL DESIGNATION
March 16, 2016**

Trail Suitability Analysis

Trail Suitability Criteria: As set forth in the Crow Wing County Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan, County natural resource managers use the following criteria to evaluate trail proposals and to improve trail planning, design and maintenance. The criteria are designed to inform an objective evaluation process with flexibility to address the diversity of situations that exist. The results of the evaluation provide information about the potential impacts of the trail and mitigations that may be needed.

The County's professional natural resource managers utilize the following scoring scale: 5= Most desirable condition, 1= Least desirable condition:

1. **Visual Quality and Landscape - *Scenic Features, Points of Interest:*** 4 of 5 – Located entirely within the Aitkin Moraine glacial landscape, the proposed designated trail consists of areas of varying rolling topography and scenic views between hills conducive for wildlife viewing, especially birds and mammals. Former Potlatch Corporation owned lands in the area are now mature pine forests adding to the diversity on the landscape. Most significantly the visual quality of the proposed designation is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of over 2.5 miles of trail bordering the scenic Mississippi River. A rest stop on “Northwoods Point” adjacent to the Mississippi River provides a scenic view of the river and surrounding landscape. Because periodic forest management activities have occurred regularly over the past half-century in the area, 40% of the forest is younger than 20 years old and 85% is younger than 40 years.
2. **Trail Linkages and Networks - *Linkages to existing trails:*** 2 of 5 – The applicant indicates a desire to connect this proposal to other local multiple-use trails and cities including the Southern Loop ATV Trail, the Miller Black Bear Area Trail, and the City of Brainerd. However, the lack of a bridge to cross over Sand Creek to the west, a local township ordinance prohibiting ATV use on township roads to the east, and private ownership patterns surrounding the County public land makes linkage to other trails currently not feasible. The proposed trail designation length of 11.5 miles on existing forest roads and trails is significantly shorter than what most off-highway vehicle enthusiasts seek as a specific riding destination¹.
3. **Impacts on Adjacent Private Properties - *Need for easements, permits, or mitigations outside of County lands:*** 4 of 5 – The proposed trail lies entirely within Crow Wing County managed public forestland. There are 19 privately owned parcels within ½ mile of the proposed designation, and only three of the 19 private parcels pass within 600 feet of the proposed designation. Proposed mitigations include safety and regulatory signs consistent with the Minnesota DNR's “Forest Access Signing and Placement Guidelines”.
4. **Proximity to Services - *Gas, food, lodging, water, campgrounds, and rest stops:*** 3 of 5 –The cities of Crosby and Ironton are located approximately 6.5 miles to the east. The City of Brainerd is located approximately 4 miles to the west. State and private campgrounds, including the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area, and Lum Park in Brainerd, are located in close proximity to the proposed designated trail. The plan does not call for the installation of any portable restrooms, shelters, or drinking water facilities.

¹ State of Minnesota, Department of Natural Resources, 2007. Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines. “Average OHV Trail User Outing.” Trails and Waterways Division, 500 Lafayette Road, St. Paul, MN 55155-4052. p. 4.24.

5. **Public Support - Clubs and User Groups:** 3 of 5 – In addition to the support of the applicant Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club, the following 22 area business and community groups have also expressed support for the proposed trail designation:
- Central Lakes ATV Club
 - The Village Inn
 - Crosby Drug Store
 - Y-Club
 - Hassies
 - Crosby Bakery
 - Cuyuna Country Auto Center
 - Deerstand
 - Country Inn of Deerwood
 - Deerwood Motel
 - True Value of Deerwood
 - Wood Tick Inn
 - Bridge Tavern
 - Barstock Liquors
 - Spalding
 - Dairy Queen of Crosby
 - Jimmy's Pizza
 - C-I Pub
 - Town Tavern
 - Ya Betcha
 - Pine Center Sportsmen's Club
 - Camp Ripley/Veterans State Trail Committee
6. **Plan for Maintenance - Available funds and partnerships:** 5 of 5 – The Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club plans to secure Crow Wing County as the local government unit sponsor and seek funding through the MN DNR Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Grant-In-Aid (GIA) program. GIA funding would partially cover the cost of signage, maintenance, monitoring, amenities, and enforcement. The remaining funding would come from the club's private finances. Upon designation, the club plans to fully maintain the designation including the installation of information and regulatory signage.
7. **Public Safety Considerations - Access for emergency services or hazards:** 4 of 5 – The proposed trail head parking area is located north of the main entrance to the site and is directly accessible off State Highway #210. Emergency services are located within 7 miles, including both the Crosby Regional Medical Center and Brainerd's Essential Health / St. Joseph's Medical Center. Additionally, many existing forest roads and trails are wide enough to accommodate emergency vehicles, including Sploezen's Road and main access arteries historically used to haul forest products to local producers. The proposed trail itself contains gently rolling to level topography with no challenging steep segments or hill climbs.
8. **Availability of Parking Areas:** 5 of 5 – The proposed trail head parking area is located north of the main entrance to the site and is directly accessible off State Highway #210 on an old timber sale landing area. This un-paved area will accommodate up to 10 vehicles or 6 vehicles with trailers for parking.
9. **Opportunities for Interpretive Information and Public Education Interpretive Info:** 5 of 5 – The proposed designated trail navigates through a historical and culturally rich area, and is in proximity to the scenic Mississippi River. Native Americans utilized these woodlands as their hunting and living areas. Many species of birds and mammals are present on the land. The Mississippi River is a scenic back-drop to the north

of the proposed designated trail and offers a great opportunity for visitors to learn about wildlife and Native American culture along the Mississippi River. Forest management activities including tree planting and timber harvests offer the opportunity to educate the public on the benefits of sustainable ecologically based forest management

The majority of the proposed designation lies upon property known as the Mississippi River Northwoods. This property was purchased from private ownership with Outdoor Heritage Funds appropriated by the state legislature as recommended by the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council. The project is an example of the important role counties have to play in effectively managing conservation lands. Specifically, county management of the Northwoods property will permanently protect 2,000 acres of wildlife habitat in forests and wetlands and 2.7 miles of river frontage from fragmentation, parcelization and development. The proposed designation will also enhance access to hunting, fishing and recreational opportunities available on the land. Signage greeting visitors was installed at the entrance in 2013 recognizing the role of Outdoor Heritage Funding in protecting habitat and the legacy of our outdoor traditions on this land.

- 10. Soil Conditions, Slope and Grade – Degree of impact and mitigations:** 4 of 5 – The proposed designation occurs within the Riverton Moraine, meaning glacial deposits consist mostly of loams and rocky material and to a lesser extent some sands. Much of the native surface consists of rocky material (gravel, cobbles, and stones) mixed in with the loam, creating structural stability that is important for multiple use trails. The rocky materials resist compaction, drain well, and add traction.² No segments have a slope greater than 20%, meaning the proposed designation will provide safe conditions for nearly all riders. Using GIA funding, the club will maintain all designated trail surfaces to a safe and sustainable condition, usable for multiple recreation types. In order to reduce compatible use conflicts and limit the amount of activity during hunting seasons, the proposed designation will be closed to recreational OHV use October 31 through April 30. Consistent with the county forest management plan, segments of the proposed designation may be closed periodically following significant weather events or during periods of vulnerable trail conditions which create unsafe and unsustainable trail conditions.
- 11. Rare, Threatened or Endangered Species or Habitats – Degree of risk and impact:** 4 of 5 – Because the trail proposal includes no new trail construction and will result in no changes to the current allowed uses, the proposed designation will not significantly affect wildlife. Crow Wing County utilizes the Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS), a collection of databases containing information about Minnesota’s rare natural features maintained by the Division of Ecological Resources within the Department of Natural Resources. The NHIS is continually updated and is the most complete source of data on Minnesota’s rare or otherwise significant species, native plant communities, and other natural features. The NHIS indicates that three species of conservation significance occurs on or within one mile of the proposed designation, including:
- Blanding’s turtles (*Emydoidea blandingii*), a state-listed threatened species, has been documented in the vicinity of the project areas and may be encountered by recreation trail users. The State of Minnesota has provided an environmental review fact sheet³ which will be utilized to minimize impacts to this species.

² State of Minnesota, Department of Natural Resources, 2007. Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines. “General Properties of Native Soils for Native Surface Trail Use.” Trails and Waterways Division, 500 Lafayette Road, St. Paul, MN 55155-4052. p. 6.8-6.10.

³ State of Minnesota, Department of Natural Resources Division of Ecological and Water Resources, 2008. Environmental Review Fact Sheet Series: Blanding’s Turtle. Accessed on 6/18/2015 @ http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/natural_resources/animals/reptiles_amphibians/turtles/blandings_turtle/factsheet.pdf

- The Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), a state-listed species of special concern, has been documented in the vicinity of the project area and may be encountered by recreation trail users. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service has recommended measures to avoid disturbing bald eagles during recreational activities. The United States Fish and Wildlife Services' National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines indicate that Bald Eagles are "...unlikely to be disturbed by routine use of roads, homes, and other facilities where such use pre-dates the eagles' successful nesting activity in a given area." And therefore in most cases, "...ongoing existing uses may proceed with the same intensity with little risk of disturbing bald eagles."⁴ As this designation proposal occurs on existing forest trails which have been open for many years and would continue to be open to continuous recreation use for 6 months (50%) of the year, it would constitute an "ongoing" use and would not need to be adjusted or relocated to minimize potential impacts on a nesting pair.
- Red Shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*), a state-listed species of special concern, has been documented to occur within one mile of the proposed designation on the opposite side of the Mississippi River. Conservation measures important to promoting occupancy by this species include retaining large amounts of mature deciduous forests, limiting non-forest areas, avoiding large clear-cut areas, and maintaining partial-to-closed canopy conditions.⁵ Because the proposed designation occurs on existing trails and does not involve the cutting of canopy trees, the proposed trail will have no effect on Red Shouldered Hawks.

12. Wetlands and Public Waters – Degree of impact, permitting and mitigations: 5 of 5 – Since the trail designation contains no new trail construction and does not change the uses which are currently allowed, no Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) or Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit is required (see: MN §4410.4300 Subp. 37 and MN §7001.1 thru 7001.1350). All trail planning, design, and development will incorporate recommendations from the Trail Planning, Design and Development Guidelines manual. The manual includes detailed considerations for ecological and physical sustainability, (including trail alignments, soils, slopes, drainage, etc.) wetland, and water issues among other important topics. Additionally, all forest management activities and as well as trail building and maintenance in the area incorporates concepts from the Voluntary Site-Level Forest Management Guidelines best management practices.

13. Cultural Resources or Historic Sites – Degree of risk and impact: 4 of 5 – According to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) archeological database, several scattered artifacts and one structural ruin was discovered in the vicinity of the proposed designated trail, particularly near the Mississippi River. According to Minnesota State Archeologist Scott Anfinson, as long as the "...project does not involve any new significant excavation, it will not affect archeological sites." Since the proposal does not involve the creation of new trails, widening of existing trails, or changes in the types of uses, the archeological sites will not be affected.

Trail Suitability Score for the Project: 52 out of 65.

Scoring Categories:

39 – 65; Trail Proposal deemed suitable for further planning and development

20 – 39; Trail Proposal may be suitable and should be reviewed for opportunities to reduce limitations and/or necessary mitigations.

⁴ United States Fish and Wildlife Service. May, 2007. National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines. "Recommendations for Avoiding Disturbance at Nest Sites." pp. 9-10. Accessed on 6/18/2015 @ <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/eagle/pdf/NationalBaldEagleManagementGuidelines.pdf>

⁵ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (online). 2015. Rare Species Guide. "Red Shouldered Hawk: Conservation / Management." Accessed on 6/18/2015 @ <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/rsg/profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABNK19030>

20 or less; Trail Proposal is unlikely to be suitable for investing further planning efforts as proposed.



**Land Services Department
Mark B. Liedl, Director**

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September 30, 2015

Mr. Bob Anderson, Chairman
Lessard Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
State Office Building, Room G95
100 Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
Saint Paul MN 55155

RE: Mississippi River Northwoods Habitat Complex

Dear Mr. Anderson,

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Crow Wing County's management of the Mississippi River Northwoods (MRNW) property during your visit with Executive Director Johnson on August 5.

Your July 20, 2015 letter requested more information on the County's management of existing trails on the property. The following provides a response to the five points set forth in your letter.

- 1. The initial and ongoing intent of the council in its recommendation for funding of MRNW project is habitat protection. In large part this is due to the sensitive nature of the property's proximity to the Mississippi River, its proximity to significant populations of people and the potential for future development if left unprotected. The Council is concerned and urges that the unique and sensitive nature of the MRNW property continue to be protected under County management.*

The County consistently has been clear that the MRNW was acquired with the intent of being managed as County forest land. These forest lands are managed under the County's Forest Resource Plan and to the standards of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative and the Forest Stewardship Council. These are the very high standards to which the MN DNR forest lands are certified. This past June, the County again successfully passed a rigorous independent third party audit of its forest management plans and operations. This certification validates that County forest lands are sustainably managed and will continue to provide multiple benefits for future generations. As such, the management of the property is focused on protecting the integrity and longevity of forest lands, habitat, and enhancement of public recreational opportunities.

Our Vision: Being Minnesota's favorite place.
Our Mission: Serve well. Deliver value. Drive results.
Our Values: Be responsible. Treat people right. Build a better future.

Crow Wing County Land Services
322 Laurel Street
Brainerd Minnesota 56425

- 2. While the Council understands that CWC manages the MRNW property in the same manner as other CWC lands, including management under the County's Recreation Trail Proposal and Planning process, The Council is very concerned regarding the extent of motorized-use trails upon the MRNW property and the potential for habitat degradation should the property become a defacto destination ATV park. With that in mind, and the understanding that CWC strive to strive to minimize detrimental impacts upon wildlife, habitat and other public uses (especially hunting) by controlling motorized trail usage upon the property.*

Historically, the MRNW area has been open to motorized use while providing recreational access for hunting and fishing as well many other uses for many years. At the time the County acquired MRNW, the property contained over 25 miles of existing forest roads and trails.

On November 5th, 2014, the Cuyuna Iron Range Riders ATV Club submitted a "Recreation Trail Development and Improvement Request" to designate 11.5 miles of the existing 25 miles of forest trails as multiple use recreation trails. Importantly, the proposal includes no plans to develop new trails, widen existing trails, or change existing uses. The total area of the proposed designated trail is 9.7 acres, or less than one-half of one percent of the 1,988 acre property.

The County is currently on Step 2 of the 5-step review process which includes analyzing impacts to sensitive environmental conditions including wetlands and known rare, threatened, or endangered species and their habitat. Step 3 of the process includes a public consultation period where interested citizens have an opportunity to provide feedback on the proposal.

Because the trail proposal includes no new trail construction and will result in no changes to the current allowed uses, the impact on habitat will be minimal. Impacts on rare, threatened, endangered, and species of special concern are specifically assessed by County Natural Resource Managers as part of the trail planning suitability analysis.

The County's Forest Resource Plan provides that trails on county forest lands are open to motorized use unless posted closed. It also provides for the closing of motorized recreation riding from November 1 through April 30 to limit the impact on big game hunting and to limit trail impacts during historically wet months during the year. Consistent with state law, ATV use for purposes of big game hunting will be allowed, including off-trail riding for purposes of retrieving a deer or putting up a deer stand.

The proposed trail designation will create a designated managed approach to recreational trail use on the property. Designated, managed trails is a public policy goal that has been established by the Crow Wing County Board of Commissioners. Designation and management create opportunities for reassurance signage, maps, and a kiosk to help keep recreational enthusiasts on the designated trails and prevent off-trail riding where the chances of intersecting with wildlife habitat has higher potential. Club volunteers also will be available to help monitor trail usage and assist with maintenance.

Trail designation also allows the County to apply for Grant In Aid (GIA) funding, which utilizes user license fees to help cover the costs of the maintenance, monitoring and enforcement. Trail Ambassador volunteers periodically monitor GIA trails as part of the Trail Ambassador program and inform users about safe riding principles. They also serve to inform law enforcement about any unsafe or illegal activities on the trails.

3. *As was discussed at length during funding proposal hearings of 2011/2012, and as was detailed in the Accomplishment Plan, the Council believes it appropriate that any improvement of motorized-us trails be inventoried and inventoried and reported to the Council and that any plan for trail use alignment for development of a paved trail be brought before the council for discussion and approval.*

An inventory of existing forest roads and trails located on the property was submitted to the Council at the March 13, 2015 meeting. The proposed Trail Designation is on 11.5 miles of existing roads and trails on the property. No new trails will be constructed and no trails will be widened under this application, and thus no new human impacts will be present on the property.

The proposed trail designation route and trail suitability analysis work conducted the county's profession land managers will be available for review and comment during a 30 day public comment period. Responses to all comments will be posted on the County website after a review period.

Consistent with statutory appropriation language, the County will seek approval of the Council on any proposal for the development or alignment of a paved trail on the property.

4. *In the accomplishment plan, a project management team of nine named individuals was detailed in the accomplishment plan, "to help steer and guide this project". It appears that Team may not have been engaged and the Council would like information whether that is correct, whether another such tam has been engaged and if so to what extent such a team has been thus far utilized, especially with regard to any multi-use trail considerations and management of upon the property.*

The project team identified in an accomplishment plan was used to help steer and guide the acquisition. Once the DNR was determined not to be the appropriate owner of the property, and the County acquired the property to be managed as County forest land, the two existing County citizen advisory committees were in place to effectively fill the citizen advisory role for the management of the MRNW.

The Lands and Forestry Advisory Committee has been in place for 40 years while the Parks and Trails Committee has been place for the past 15 years. Recently both committees were combined into a single committee (Natural Resources Advisory Committee) and meets on a quarterly basis. More information including meeting minutes can be found on the County website <http://www.crowwing.us/1324/Natural-Resources-Advisory-Committee>

Please also note that during the time of the acquisition, three of the project team members (Drotts, Miller, and Schaubach) were serving on either the Lands and Forestry or the Parks

and Trails Advisory Committees. In addition, since the County has acquired the MRNW, (over 2 years ago) no member of the acquisition project team contacted the County regarding the status of the project team and the need for any meetings.

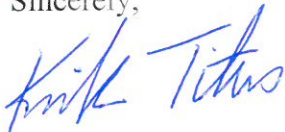
5. *The last paragraph on page 2 of the CWC Land Services' Mississippi River Northwoods Project Management Summary (V.011812) states, "Certain initial project work is require to implement the MRNW parcel into the County's sustainable forest management system." The Council is very interested to receive an update from CWC as to the progress of this initial project work as it will have finite impact on future management of MRNW parcel*

Much of this information was previously submitted to the LSOHC in the status report for 2013 and 2014.

- Forest Inventory: Completed 6-20-13
- Inventory and Map Native Plant Communities to the Ecological Classifications: Completed 9-19-13
- GPS Roads and Trails: Conducted between May, 2014 and June, 2015.
- Classify Roads and Trails: Fieldwork completed 6-1-15
- Close spur roads and trails: Not Completed
- Signage Lease signs removed 12-13-2012. Main entrance sign installed 8-26-13
- Road Maintenance Completed 9-12-13, 5-16-14 and 6-5-15
- Reclaim gravel pit. Planted 7,000 Jack Pine Seedlings 5-19-15, bud capped seedlings fall 2014, expect to bud cap again Fall 2015 and 2016
- GIS Mapping and Data Entry: Digitize stand boundaries, forest, road and native plant community inventory. Completed 9-19-13. Revised and updated in June, 2015.

I hope this information is helpful to the Council.

Sincerely,

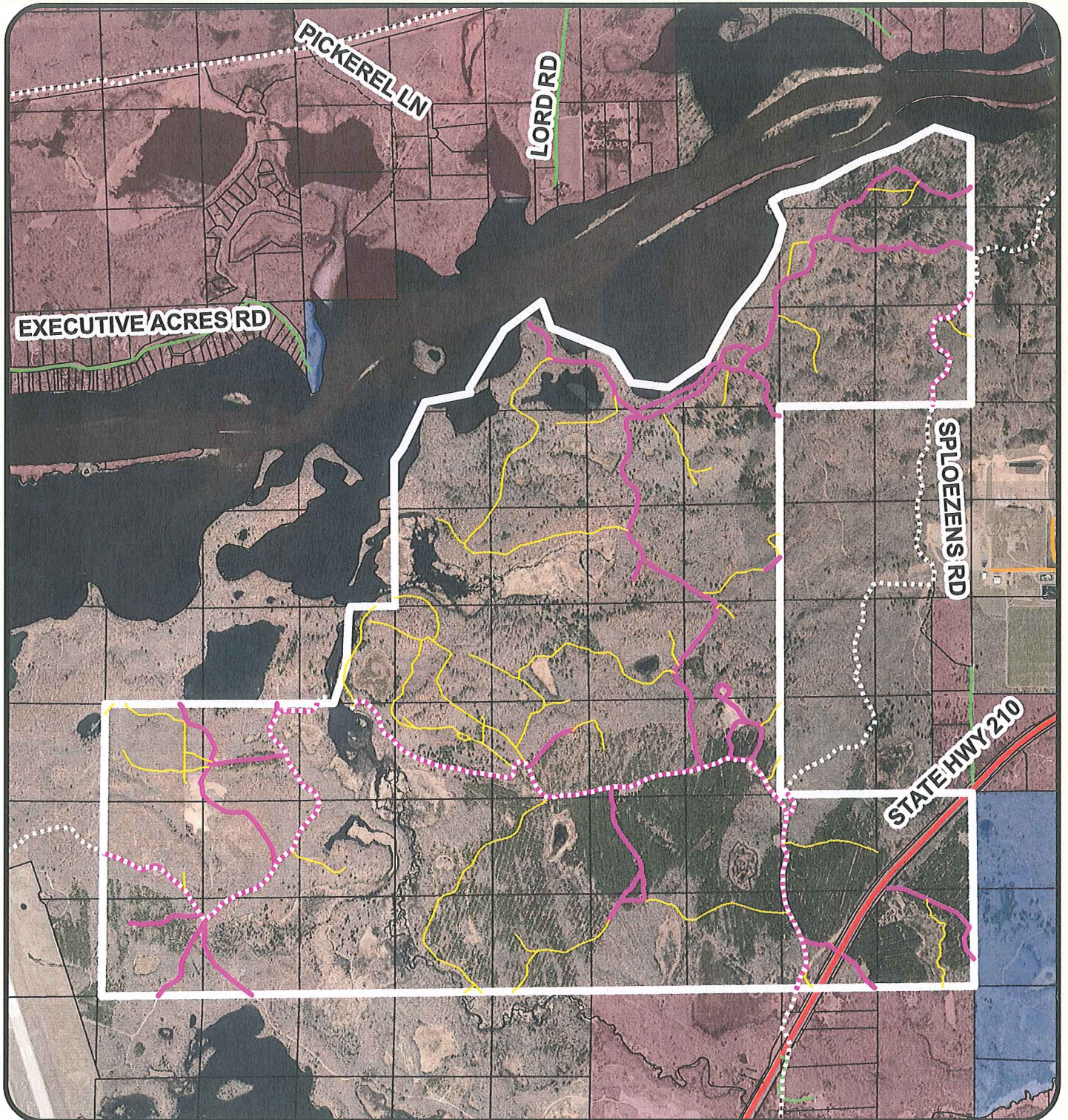


Kirk Titus
Land Services Supervisor

cc:

Mark Johnson, Executive Director Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council
Crow Wing County Board of Commissioners
Tim Houle, County Administrator
Mark Liedl, County Recorder & Land Services Director

Trail Inventory of the Mississippi River Northwoods Acquisition Oak Lawn Township, sections 23, 26, 27, 33-35








0 0.2 0.4 0.8 Miles

1 inch equals 0.37 miles

Existing forest trails = 19.6 mi.

Legend

-  Miss. Rvr Nthds Boundary
-  Parcel data
-  GIA snowmobile trails
-  ROW width > 10 ft (10.5 mi.)
-  ROW width < 10 ft (9.1 mi.)



Crow Wing County
Public Land Management
322 Laurel Street, Suite #12

For non-legal, reference use only

3/9/2015

Crow Wing County Coordinates (projection) ArcGIS 10.1

218-824-1115