



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 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.

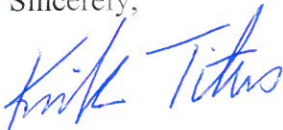
5. *The last paragraph on page 2 of the CWC Land Services' Mississippi River Northwoods Project Management Summary (V.011812) states, "Certain initial project work is require to implement the MRNW parcel into the County's sustainable forest management system." The Council is very interested to receive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