

SUBJECT: Request approval of the Northern Kettle Moraine Region Wildlife, Fish and Natural Areas Master Plan**FOR:** August 2015 Board meeting**TO BE PRESENTED BY:** Tom Hauge, Bureau Director Wildlife Management and Ed Jepsen, Planner Facilities and Lands**SUMMARY:**

The Northern Kettle Moraine Region (NKMR) Wildlife, Fish and Natural Area properties draft master plan includes nine properties totaling 15,903 acres of state owned land. The NKMR planning group includes six wildlife properties (12,698 acres), two fishery areas (1,472 acres) and one state natural area (1,733 acres). In addition, 591 acres of easements and 309 acres of leased land provide public access for hunting, fishing and other nature based outdoor recreational activities.

The NKMR properties are within an hour drive of up to two million people. Their appeal is expected to increase as our population grows, land ownership becomes more fragmented and access to private lands becomes more difficult. Fishing, hunting and trapping are popular in Ozaukee, Sheboygan and Washington counties with a total of nearly 56,000 fishing licenses, 67,000 hunting licenses and 900 trapping licenses sold annually.

The recreational and habitat management goals for these properties include the following:

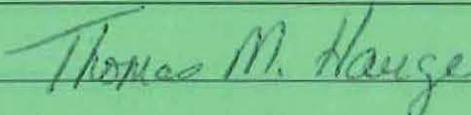
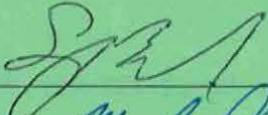
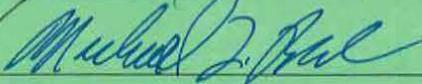
1. Provide quality hunting, fishing, trapping, nature based outdoor recreation and research opportunities.
2. Improve habitat quality and productivity by providing larger blocks of habitat for game and non-game species.
3. Coordinate with public, private and non-profit partners to improve recreational opportunities and management efficiency.
4. Protect and enhance the coldwater fisheries, especially on the Onion River system.

The following project boundary and acreage goal adjustments are recommended:

- Contract project boundaries by 245 acres where conservation and public access benefits are unlikely to be realized.
- Net expansion of the wildlife project boundaries by 1,945 acres and the acreage goals by 1,160 acres. The DNR currently owns 72 acres and Wi DOT owns 168 acres within the expansion area.
- Net expansion of the fishery project boundaries by 366 acres with no expansion of the acreage goal. The DNR owns 61 acres within the expanded project boundary.
- Expand the Cedarburg Bog State Natural Area project boundary by 699 acres and the acreage goal by 250 acres. The DNR owns 69 acres within the proposed expansion area. Designate four new state natural areas (355 acres total) and expand two existing natural areas from 212 acres to 721 acres on existing DNR lands.

RECOMMENDATION: Approval of the master plan per NR 44.04(3), Wis. Adm. Code**LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS (check all that are applicable):**

- Background memo
 The Master Plan documents may be viewed online at:
<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/Lands/MasterPlanning/NorthernKettles/>

Approved by	Signature	Date
Tom Hauge, Wildlife Management Bureau Director		7/8/15
Sanjay Olson, Land Division Administrator		7/6/15
Cathy Stepp, Secretary		7/9/15

CORRESPONDENCE/MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 6, 2015

TO: Natural Resources Board Members

FROM: Cathy Stepp

SUBJECT: Northern Kettle Moraine Region Wildlife, Fish and Natural Areas Master Plan and Environmental Assessment

I recommend that the Natural Resources Board approve the draft Master Plan for the Northern Kettle Moraine Region (NKMR) Wildlife, Fish and Natural Areas. This plan outlines the land management and public use goals for nine properties (i.e., six wildlife properties, two fishery areas and one state natural area) located primarily in Sheboygan, Washington, Ozaukee, Dodge and Fond du Lac counties. The Master Plan documents may be viewed online at: <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/Lands/MasterPlanning/NorthernKettles/>

Recreation Management – These properties provide opportunities for hunting, fishing and trapping. They are important areas for white-tailed deer, turkey, pheasant and waterfowl hunting and are close to the largest population centers in Wisconsin. They provide 35% of the state lands available for hunting in Ozaukee, Washington and Sheboygan counties. Deer hunting in these counties has more than a local appeal. About 24% of the deer harvested in these counties are taken by hunters who live outside these counties. Only 5% of the land area in these counties is in Department ownership yet 12% of the harvested deer are taken on public lands.

Other nature based recreational activities include bird and wildlife watching, hiking, berry picking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and increasingly dog walking. Canoeing and kayaking are increasingly popular as recognized by the recently established Rock River National Water Trail which begins at the Theresa WA.

There are 13 miles of service roads, three miles of designated Ice Age Trail at LaBudde Creek, and about one mile of primitive hiking trails in the headwaters of Mill Creek (Onion River SBP). There are about 6.5 miles of connecting snowmobile trails on these properties. Currently there are 55 parking lots, two improved boat landings and eight carry-in landings on the properties. The draft plan recommends six additional parking lots, two additional class 2 dog training areas, improved hunting and coldwater fishing access for mobility impaired individuals and enhanced boat access opportunities. Additional access points may be added depending on approval of the boundary adjustments, future property acquisition and collaboration with partners.

The primary recreational management goals for these properties are as follows:

- Provide quality hunting, fishing, trapping, nature based recreation and research opportunities.
- Improve habitat productivity and acreage of grasslands, oak woodlands, savanna and aspen for deer, turkey, pheasant, waterfowl, small game, woodcock and migrating birds.

- Collaborate with public, private and non-profit partner organizations to improve recreational opportunities and increase management efficiency.

Habitat Management – About 12,260 acres, 78% of the NKMR total, will be managed as Habitat Management Areas (HMAs) for the benefit of general game and non-game wildlife. Important HMA cover types include emergent wetlands, grasslands, shrub lands and lowland forests. For example, grassland management seeks to strategically compensate for the loss of about 3,700 acres of grassland from the federal Conservation Reserve Program grasslands in Sheboygan, Ozaukee and Washington counties. The grassland management seeks to promote cover for pheasant and provide habitat for duck production, grassland birds and other wildlife. Accordingly, agricultural practices will continue to be a valuable management tool. The proposed habitat management goals include:

- Enhance native cover types to improve opportunities for hunting, trapping, fishing and other nature based recreation in this intensively developed part of the state.
- Improve the quality and increase the acreage of grasslands for ducks and cover for pheasants.
- Improve habitat for woodcock and migrating waterfowl, song birds and shorebirds.
- Protect coldwater streams with an emphasis on the Onion River system and improvements to Nichols Creek and Allenton Creek (the only trout stream in Washington County).

The remaining 3,645 acres will be managed as Native Community Management Areas to protect high quality native plant communities and the associated game and non-game species. The plan recommends the expansion of several existing natural areas (i.e., Cedarburg Bog SNA and Jackson Marsh WA) and several new state natural areas at Mullet Creek WA, Onion River SBP and Nichols Creek WA. All of these expansions are located on existing state lands, except for the Cedarburg Bog adjustment. The natural communities include Bottomland Hardwoods, White Cedar and Tamarack Forests, Oak Woodlands, Sedge Meadows and Calcareous Fens.

Project Boundary and Acreage Goal Adjustments – These adjustments are intended to provide the following benefits:

1. Continue to offer quality hunting, fishing, trapping and nature based outdoor recreation experiences in an area undergoing increasing development and population growth.
2. Provide larger blocks of higher quality habitat for nesting, foraging and/or cover for game species and a range of migratory and resident species. Also larger blocks should improve the efficiency of habitat management activities (e.g., prescribed burns, controlling invasive species and wetland restoration).
3. Expand upland habitat for grassland nesting waterfowl and pheasants. Ideally 1:1 grassland to wetland acreage ratio is considered productive for waterfowl production.

The current ratio on the larger wildlife areas is about 0.5:1. The proposed habitat management recommendations and boundary and acreage goal adjustments are intended to improve this ratio to about 0.8:1.

4. Protect current recreational activities from non-compatible land uses and reduce user confusion about property lines to minimize trespass issues. Gun hunting is not allowed within 100 yards of a residential dwelling unless the resident provides permission. Expanding boundaries to roads will provide greater certainty these lands can be used for all of the intended purposes.
5. Protect the quality and quantity of surface and groundwater resources flowing to the coldwater (trout) streams, especially the Class 1 Onion River and Nichols Creek systems. Enhance warmwater fishery habitat and populations to the extent resources are available.
6. Coordinate acquisition, either by fee title or easement, and property management activities with partners to maximize habitat benefits, improve recreational opportunities, and leverage limited acquisition funds and staff resources to achieve the greatest conservation benefit.
7. Address forest ecosystem health and diversity related to Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) impacts on forest communities and maintaining remnant tamarack communities.
8. Protect Cedarburg Bog State Natural Area as a unique property for research, nature enjoyment and educational activities as well as a property that is popular with local waterfowl hunters.

Budget – The estimated budget is about \$160,000/year for infrastructure and \$80,000/year for habitat management. These costs would be covered by ongoing state appropriations and multiple sources of federal, state, local and private funds such as the Wildlife Restoration Fund, North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA) and game stamps (i.e., waterfowl, pheasant and turkey stamps). Costs to manage new parcels will depend on the need for active management, property blocking, fiscal returns (e.g., farm agreements and timber harvests), and access to tools that improve management efficiency. Future operational costs are anticipated to remain similar to or increase slightly above current operations with improved efficiency offsetting some of the costs of managing additional lands.

Stakeholder Support – The NKMR properties have been generously supported by local units of government, numerous groups and individuals. The Sheboygan County Conservation Alliance has supported efforts in Sheboygan County generally and helped establish Nichols Creek specifically; Ducks Unlimited has donated significantly at Theresa WA; Trout Unlimited, the Windway Corporation and the Sheboygan County Stewardship Fund were instrumental in restoring the Onion River trout fishery; the Doty Hunting and Fishing Club stocks pheasant at Mullet Creek WA; the Ice Age Trail Alliance (IATA) has developed and maintains a popular hiking trail segment at LaBudde FA; and local snowmobile clubs have built and maintained trails and bridges on several properties. A particularly active collaboration has occurred at Cedarburg Bog State Natural Area with the UW-Milwaukee Field Station, the Friends of Cedarburg Bog

and the Ozaukee-Washington Land Trust. This list does not include the valuable contributions of other local units of government, other land trusts, sporting groups and individuals. Collectively, these entities have conservatively donated over 9,000 hours of labor plus significant financial donations, almost \$500,000 since 2000, to enhance the NKMR properties.

Public Participation – Three open houses were held during this planning process to engage public involvement for this mater plan.

1. **Regional and Property Analysis Open House:** Twenty six people attended the open house held on Tuesday, October 30, 2012 at the Campbellsport High School Library for this initial phase of the planning process. The comments favored continuing habitat and species management as presently conducted, maintaining the undeveloped character of the properties, encouraging protection and restoration of the trout streams similar to the Onion River efforts, maintaining snowmobile access, protecting Cedarburg Bog, and expanding project boundaries to include parcels that would enhance the resources and recreational opportunities on these properties.
2. **Draft Master Plan Open House(s):** The draft master plan was released to the public on September 10, 2014 and the comment period closed on October 10, 2014. Two open houses were held to receive public comments on the draft master plan. Fourteen people attended the September 25, 2014 open house at the DNR Plymouth Service Station and 30 individuals attended the Washington County Annex Building open house on September 26, 2014. A total of forty two written comments were submitted via email, at the open houses or on-line. In addition, staff recorded verbal comments received at the open houses. See the draft master plan for a summary of the public comments and the department responses.

Item of Interest and Recommendation – The proposed boardwalk and the question of on-going boat storage at Cedarburg Bog (Mud Lake) generated the most comments. A follow-up stakeholder process to consider the boat storage issues is recommended in the Public Use Objectives and Prescriptions for Cedarburg Bog.