

**MODIFIED**  
**Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources**  
**Natural Resources Board Agenda Item**

Public Comments Summary has been added after memo.

**SUBJECT:** Request approval of the Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area Master Plan

**FOR:** October 2015 Board meeting

**TO BE PRESENTED BY:** Yoyi Steele, Wildlife Planner

**SUMMARY:**

The Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area (WLWA) is located in south-central Oneida County, some 10 miles west of the City of Rhinelander. It encompasses 2,632 acres of mostly forested land, interspersed with lakes and wetlands. A 962-acre Scattered Forest Land parcel directly adjacent to the property has been managed as part of the wildlife area since acquisition and is included in the master plan, for a total of 3,594 acres of state owned and managed land. The Board of Commissioners of Public Lands holds a forest management easement on 778 acres of the Scattered Forest Land parcel.

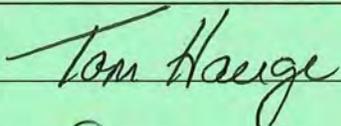
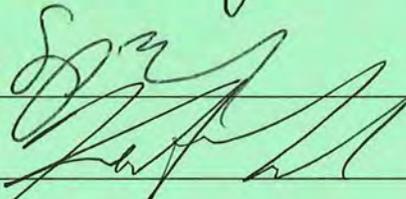
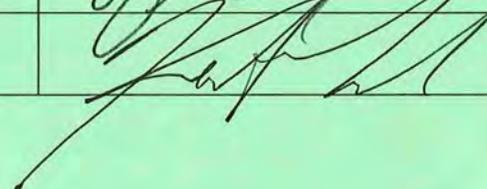
The WLWA Draft Master Plan focuses on maintenance and enhancement of forests, particularly early-successional types (oak; aspen; birch; alder), and wetlands for an array of associated wildlife species through habitat management, and protection of high-quality riparian wetland communities through native community management. The plan also supports management of some stands of oak and pine for older age classes. Recreationally, the property is a large draw for hunting, particularly for ruffed grouse (the top recreational use on the property) but also for large- and small-game, waterfowl, and turkey hunting. Recreation management in the plan emphasizes this traditional outdoor activity, as well as other nature-based pursuits such as hiking and wildlife watching, through maintenance of existing facilities, habitat management, and maintaining and improving access. New proposals include developing additional parking areas, formally designating a network of hunter walking paths as hunter access/hiking trails, opening the entire property to bike use, and a new ATV trail. An existing snowmobile trail will be maintained.

The plan is proposing 2,665 acres of project boundary expansions, 768 acres of which are already in Department ownership, for a net expansion of 1,897 acres. These modifications seek to encompass lands that are already DNR-owned and managed; increase opportunities for access and improve customer service by adjusting boundaries to follow existing roads; expand recreational opportunities and provide potential to add new ones (e.g., dog training; shooting range); improve management efficiency; and encompass significant natural features. Land cover in the majority of the expansion acres consists of forests, wetlands, and water (~1,600 acres). Agricultural lands comprise 148 acres of proposed expansions.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Board approval of the Master Plan per NR 44.04(3)

**LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS (check all that are applicable):**

- Background memo
- Type name of attachment if applicable
- Type name of attachment if applicable
- Type name of attachment if applicable

Approved by	Signature	Date
Tom Hauge, Wildlife Bureau Director		9/22/15
Sanjay Olson, Fish, Wildlife, & Parks Division Administrator		9/30/15
Cathy Stepp, Secretary		10/1/15

cc: Board Liaison – AD/8

**CORRESPONDENCE/MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** September 22, 2015  
**TO:** Natural Resources Board Members  
**FROM:** Cathy Stepp  
**SUBJECT:** Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area Draft Master Plan

I recommend that the Natural Resources Board approve the Master Plan for the Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area (WLWA). This plan outlines our land management and public use goals for this 3,594-acre mostly forested Department property located in south-central Oneida County. Electronic versions of all the Master Plan documents may be viewed online at:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/Lands/MasterPlanning/Woodboro/>

**Background**

In 2014, the local ATV club requested a connector trail across a portion of the WLWA. This property does not have a master plan. The Department conducted a trail feasibility study which concluded that the proposed trail could be sited, with several modifications. When the feasibility study was presented to the NRB in October, 2014, the Board directed the Department to complete a master plan for the property by the end of 2015. A draft master plan is now ready for presentation at the October, 2015 meeting.

The Department initiated master planning for the WLWA with a public input process during December, 2014 and January, 2015. A public meeting was held on January 14, 2015 in Harshaw at which the public was invited to provide input into the planning process and comment on preliminary planning documents. Some 40 people attended the public meeting, and 71 written comments were received. Comments from this public input process, the Regional and Property Analysis, technical input from Department staff, as well as public comments from the 2014 ATV trail feasibility study were among the considerations that guided the planning team in the development of the proposed plan.

**ATV Trail Recommendation**

The master plan is recommending inclusion of the proposed ATV trail. The 2014 ATV trail feasibility study concluded that the proposed trail could be approved with several modifications, particularly two re-routes to avoid sensitive wetland areas. The proposal would establish approximately 1.7 miles of connector trail between Oscar Jenny Road and the Oneida County Forest to the south to support a regional trail/route network. A substantial portion of the proposed trail route would follow an existing snowmobile trail. Approximately 0.3 miles of new trail would have to be constructed to avoid adjacent wetlands. The trail would also have to meet other development and operations requirements, including: meeting the Department's established ATV/UTV trail design standards; repair or replacement of the existing snowmobile bridge; a trail use season consistent with that of Oneida County; a trail MOU between the sponsoring club and the Department; and establishment of connector trail segments on either end of the proposed trail.

The Department received public comments regarding the trail during both the trail feasibility study process and master plan development. During the feasibility study, a total of 110 individuals or organizations submitted written comments during the first comment period and 40 commented on the draft feasibility study in the second comment period. These comments revealed substantial interest in the WLWA and in ATV/UTV riding in the Woodboro area. Trail supporters feel that there is demonstrated desire and need for more ATV trails in general and this one in particular, that off-road ATV trails provide a better and safer experience than road routes, that ATVs contribute to the local economy, that this trail can be accommodated on this property, and that the trail will improve access for elderly or disabled users.

During the master planning process 40 people attended the plan initiation public meeting, with 71 written comments received, and 20 people attended the draft master plan public meeting, with 16 written comments received. The majority of comments during master planning public input were opposed to ATV trail establishment. Opponents feel the trail is not necessary, is incompatible with existing uses, will disturb wildlife and cause environmental damage, will disturb the quiet or solitude of the property, and will establish a precedent for similar trails on other wildlife areas or sensitive areas.

Based on the totality of public comments received during both the trail feasibility study and the master plan and the conclusions of the feasibility study, the Department feels there is a demonstrated desire for the trail, and that the trail can be routed in an environmentally sound way. The trail traverses only a small portion of the property.

### **Other Plan Highlights**

Recommendations in the proposed plan collectively seek to enhance the experience of property users and increase the potential to sustainably manage wildlife populations. Proposed habitat management is intended to improve productivity of game and non-game species, with an emphasis on maintaining and enhancing early-successional forest and wetland habitats. Recreation management emphasizes the traditional outdoor pursuits of hunting and trapping, as well as other nature-based activities such as hiking and wildlife viewing. The plan is recommending inclusion of the proposed ATV trail. The recommended project boundary adjustments are intended to encompass lands already owned by the Department, improve public access, enhance recreational opportunities, improve the efficiency of our management efforts, and protect significant natural features and habitats (e.g., streams, lake frontage). Our approach builds upon existing partnerships with other agencies, local governments, sporting groups, and NGOs.

Management highlights of the proposed Master Plan include:

- Continued emphasis on management of early-successional upland and lowland forest types, including aspen, birch, oak, and alder.
- Protection and management of wetland and aquatic resources, including ephemeral ponds, conifer wetlands, and emergent vegetation around lakes and streams.
- Management of some stands of red and white pine and oak for older age classes.
- Continued emphasis on traditional outdoor recreational activities such as hunting and trapping.
- Modifications to existing project boundaries, including 2,568 acres of expansions, 768 acres of which are already in Department ownership.
- Continued collaborations with conservation organizations, local governments, and private landowners on shared stewardship, management, and recreation goals.

The DNR released the WLWA Draft Master Plan and Environmental Analysis for public review on July 14, 2015, with the comment period extending to August 7. A public meeting was held on July 23 at which the public was invited to view informational displays and draft plan documents, hear a short presentation, ask questions during a formal question-and-answer session, speak one-on-one with Department staff, and provide their comments on the draft plan. Approximately 20 people attended the public meeting. The Department received verbal and written comments submitted during and after the public meeting. A total of 16 written comments were received.

The attached public comment summary provides additional details.

## WOODBORO LAKES WILDLIFE AREA MASTER PLAN PLAN INITIATION PUBLIC COMMENT SUMMARY

### PUBLIC INPUT PROCESS FOR DRAFT PLAN

The DNR released the Woodboro Lakes Wildlife Area (WLWA) Draft Master Plan and Environmental Assessment for public review on July 14, 2015, with the comment period extending to August 7. A public meeting was held on July 23 at which the public was invited to view informational displays and draft plan documents, hear a short presentation, ask questions during a formal question-and-answer session, speak one-on-one with Department staff, and provide their comments on the draft plan. Approximately 20 people attended the public meeting. The Department received verbal and written comments submitted during and after the public meeting. A total of 16 written comments were received. The public involvement timeline is summarized in the table below.

#### Chronology of Public Involvement

Date	Contact
July 14, 2015	Invitation to public meetings sent to stakeholder list and planning documents posted on WDNR Web site. Statewide WDNR news release sent out announcing public meeting.
July 17, 2015	Hard copies of RPA sent to WDNR Rhinelander Service Center and Tomahawk and Lac du Flambeau public libraries.
July 23, 2015	Public meeting held at Northwoods Community Elementary School, 6:00-8:00 pm.
July 14-August 7, 2015	Public comment period.
September, 2015	Public comment summary posted on WDNR Web site.

### SUMMARY OF COMMENTS RECEIVED

The majority of verbal and written comments received on the draft plan were related to the proposed ATV trail. A handful of comments addressed general resource management, public use, and boundary modification topics. Affiliations (where noted) included local residents, Hancock Lake Association, Nokomis ATV Club, Ruffed Grouse Society, and The Wildlife Society, Wisconsin Chapter.

#### Public Meeting Verbal Comments/Questions

Below is a summary of the questions asked and answers given during the public meeting question-and-answer session.

#### **Why is a full environmental assessment not needed for the ATV trail?**

*Chapter 4 of the draft master plan ("Analysis of Impacts") does provide an assessment of impacts of the proposed trail. Property planning under Chapter NR 44, Wisconsin*

*Administrative Code, is considered an “equivalent analysis action” and therefore complies with the Wisconsin Environmental Policy Act (WEPA).*

**Are motorized uses allowed on a Wildlife Area?**

*Yes, only on designated trails.*

**What other uses would be allowed on the ATV trail?**

*The trail would be signed to indicate that it’s an ATV trail. People could still walk or bike on it, but other motorized vehicles would not be allowed. The existing snowmobile trail would remain in use.*

**How will the bridge replacement be funded?**

*The DNR has submitted an internal request for funding to make needed repairs/upgrades to the snowmobile trail bridge.*

**What about other costs to develop the ATV trail?**

*Those costs would be borne by the Nokomis ATV Club.*

**Written Comments**

Below is a summary of the written comments received, grouped by topic area.

**ATV Trail**

As noted above, most of the comments received addressed this topic. Comments were submitted both in support of and in opposition to the proposed trail; the majority of comments expressed opposition.

Comments in support of the trail expressed the following:

- General support for establishment of the proposed trail.
- This trail will boost the northwoods trail system and promote tourism.
- The trail will make it easier for senior citizens, including hunters, to get around on the property.
- ATVs are not as loud as Harleys.

Comments opposed to the trail gave the following reasons:

- ATVs are not compatible with Wildlife Areas. The primary purpose of wildlife areas is to provide places for hunting and trapping. The proposed trail will conflict with hunting and trapping.
- ATVs are not compatible with any current users of the property who are all non-motorized except for snowmobiles, which are present only in winter.
- ATVs will detract from the experience of silent sport users of the property and those seeking quiet and solitude.
- ATVs cause noise, dust, and damage to soils, plants, and animals and also spread invasive species.

- Unlike snowmobiles, ATVs will be operating when wildlife and plants are breeding/flowering and will cause more disturbance because of that.
- The route of the trail passes close to the Native Community Management Area along Little Rice Creek, posing a risk to high-quality natural communities, water quality, and shoreline stabilization, particularly if there is any off-trail riding to avoid the bridge.
- ATVs will tear up any surface that is not paved (blacktop).
- Approval of this trail will establish a precedent for other ATV trail requests on wildlife areas or other sensitive areas. These requests will be much harder to deny if Woodboro is opened.
- This trail is not needed. An existing ATV route handles traffic around the southeast corner of the property and Oneida County and 4 out of the 5 adjoining counties contain over 400 miles of ATV trails and routes.
- This trail does not meet DNR siting requirements or established criteria for evaluating feasibility of ATV use on DNR lands: the proposed trail is not providing a new connection between existing trail networks and will interfere with the primary purpose of the property (i.e., hunting).
- If the trail use season has to be consistent with that of Oneida County, as the plan states, then there is no opportunity to mitigate negative effects on hunters by closing the trail during the hunting season.
- This trail does not have wide public support and should not have been included as a preferred option in the plan: the majority of comments at the beginning of the master planning process were not in favor of the trail.

In addition, a comment submitted by the Oneida County Forest Director reported the following: the Oneida County Forestry, Land, and Recreation Committee passed a motion during their August, 2015 meeting indicating that while they are willing to sponsor the development of the ATV trail segment on Oneida County Forest land, they are not willing to sponsor the segment proposed for development on the WLWA.

#### **General Resource Management**

- As land development increases in Oneida County and other northwoods counties, it's more and more important to maintain large tracts of wild land.
- DNR has done a great job analyzing local and regional wildlife habitat needs.
- Support for proposed land classifications and forest habitat prescriptions.
- Good job balancing early-successional habitat management with maintenance of oak and pine in older age classes. This mix will benefit wildlife and biodiversity.
- Support for forest management practices that sustain/enhance aspen, oak, and alder for both game and nongame species.
- The plan does a good job protecting the small lakes, wetlands, and streams.

#### **General Public Use**

- Support for both consumptive (hunting) and non-consumptive (wildlife viewing) uses.

- WLWA provides high-quality grouse and woodcock hunting. The Ruffed Grouse Society has provided significant support for maintenance of hunter walking trails on this property. The upcoming designation of this property as a Cooperative Ruffed Grouse Management Area will reaffirm our respective organizations' devotion to long-term management actions that recognize grouse hunting as the most popular use of this property.
- Maintain walking trails and snowmobile trail.
- Support for allowing bikes on all trails.
- Mow trails on a regular basis to make walking/biking easier and to keep down ticks, mosquitoes, and deer flies.
- Support for motor vehicle access to a canoe carry-in on Little Rice Creek.
- For roads that allow motor vehicle traffic (i.e., cars and trucks), please install directional signs to Oscar Jenny Road and Old K as these roads have several splits and it's easy to take a wrong turn and get lost.

#### **Boundary Modifications**

- General support for proposed boundary modifications.
- Would be good to expand the project boundary so land can be purchased in the future to fill out the boundary and protect lake and wetland habitat.
- Fully support the proposed boundary expansions, especially the expansion to include the large Scattered Forest Land parcel within the wildlife area.