Form 1100-001N (Rev. 09/15)

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Natural Resources Board Agenda Item

Item No. 2.B.1.

SUBJECT: Request approval of the Sugar River Planning Group (SRPG) Draft Master Plan.

FOR: June 2016 Board meeting

TO BE PRESENTED BY: Diane Brusoe, Property Planning Section Chief

SUMMARY:

The Sugar River Planning Group includes 14,154 acres of fee title (13,751 acres) and trust land (403 acres) in southcentral Dane County, eastern Green County and western Rock County. The planning group includes seven wildlife areas, one stand-alone State Natural Area, the Montrose Unit of the State Ice Age Trail Area, three Stream Bank Protection Areas, 1,720 acres of scattered wildlife parcels acquired under several statewide authorities, and 903 acres of easements.

The primary recreational and habitat goals for the planning group include:

- ☐ Provide sustainable hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking and nature-based recreation;
- ☐ Improve habitat quality and productivity for game and non-game species; and
- ☐ Coordinate with partners to improve regional recreation opportunities, provide quality habitats on a landscape-scale, and increase the management efficiency on state lands.

Real estate changes in the plan include project boundary and acquisition goal reductions and expansions as well as parcel redesignations. These changes, which are outlined in the real estate table in the attached memo, will allow for more recreation opportunities in Rock and Green counties where public lands are limited. They are intended to leverage existing conservation investments, maintain or enhance the quality of the habitats, and promote efficient property management.

Other real estate changes include housekeeping of the Footville Wildlife Area. This project currently is listed in the department's land records system for the purposes of tracking Voluntary Public Access leases in the Footville Area. The Sugar River Master Plan proposes establishment of a 13,000-acre project boundary, called the Footville Wildlife Area. The existing scattered fee title parcels owned by the department (481 acres) are being proposed to be re-designated from their existing statewide authorities and acquisition goals to now be within the Footville Wildlife Area. The acquisition goal for the Footville Wildlife Area is proposed to be 481 acres. Future acquisition in the Footville Wildlife Area project boundary will be easement acquisition, with a cap of 3,000 easement acres.

Link to the master plan is: http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/masterplanning/sugarriver/

RECOMMENDATION: Recommend approval of the Sugar River Planning Group Master Plan per NR 44.04(3), Wis. Adm. Code; approval of real estate changes to the project boundaries and acquisition goals; and parcel redesignations as outlined in the attached memo.

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

☒ Background memo
☒ Master plan documents may be viewed online:
dnr.wi.gov; "master planning"
http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/masterplanning/sugarriver/

☐ Type name of attachment if applicable
☐ Type name of attachment if applicable

Approved by	Signature	Date
Tom Hauge, Wildlife Management Bureau Director	Tom Hauge	5/16/16
Sanjay Olson, Division Administrator, Fish, Wildlife & Parks		5/22/16
Cathy Stepp, Secretary		5/24/16

cc: Board Liaison – AD/8

DATE: May 16, 2016

TO: Natural Resources Board Members

FROM: Cathy Stepp - Secretary, Department of Natural Resources

SUBJECT: Request approval of the Sugar River Planning Group Draft Master Plan

Project Description
This plan outlines the land management and public use goals for twelve properties and acres of statewide authority in south central Dane, eastern Green and western Rock counties. The properties provide opportunities for white-tailed deer, turkey, pheasant and waterfowl hunting, trout fishing, and trapping. 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 popular activities at Avon Bottoms WA (Sugar River) and Albany WA (Little Sugar and Sugar rivers). Almost 80% of the total acreage will be managed for the benefit of game and non-game wildlife with cover types including emergent wetlands, grasslands, shrub lands and lowland forests.

Public Involvement
The department held four public open house meetings during this planning process. Two meetings were held to review and comment on the Regional and Property Analysis. Thirty four people attended the two open houses and at least nineteen individuals provided comments on the comment sheets, as sticky notes on maps or as a verbal comment to the DNR staff. Three parties submitted comments via email and three submitted comments by letter or through phone calls.

Two open house meetings were held in September 2015 to review and comment on the draft master plan. Forty-nine people attended the open houses. Forty-four written comments were submitted via email, at the open houses or on-line. In addition, staff recorded 11 verbal comments received at the open houses.

In addition, department staff were invited and attended Town of Avon Board meetings on April 4th and May 3rd. The primary topic of interest was in discussing nuisance target shooting and the potential for a shooting range being located in their town. There was almost unanimous opposition to locating a shooting range in the town and a desire for Rock County to be regulated under NR 45. The Wisconsin Conservation Congress is the designated venue for the public to propose rule changes. The department recognizes the target shooting issues that the Town raised, and will start working towards a viable, corrective solution.

Significant Issues of Public Interest
Comments from both sets of open houses can be categorized into Recreation Management, Habitat Management, Infrastructure Management and Project Boundary Adjustments. Hunting, fishing, trapping and other compatible activities such as hiking, cross country skiing and birdwatching will continue to be the primary recreation activities on these properties. The properties will remain lightly developed with an emphasis on non-motorized access. The availability and management of trails was a common topic.

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A substantial majority of individuals and groups supported the habitat recommendations promoting grassland and prairie habitats, protecting the floodplain forests along the Sugar River and Little Sugar River, promoting oak/oak savanna communities, and protecting coldwater and warmwater sport fishing in the Sugar River watershed. Protecting and enhancing these habitats is a high priority.

The infrastructure receiving the most public comments was the potential siting of a shooting range at the Avon Bottoms WA with most comments opposed to siting a shooting range at Avon Bottoms. As a result, the department has removed the parcel of concern from the proposed project boundary of Avon Bottoms WA. Overall the comments did not oppose a shooting range in the planning project area, but recommended it would be better sited near busy highways, areas less sensitive to noise, and away from residential settings.

The department consistently received strong response in support of the expanded project boundaries and acreage goals. County parks programs indicated the adjustments would help meet recognized recreation needs and would aid in the protection of environmentally sensitive areas.

Stakeholder Support

These properties and adjacent lands have been generously supported by grants, partner groups and individuals. Significant restoration work by the USDA-NRCS has occurred on or adjacent to these properties. It is estimated that the federal actions and other partner donations approach $1.5 million dollars and that partners have conservatively donated about 500 hours of labor since 2000. Some examples of the broad range of support include:

- Pheasants Forever has donated land and funds for habitat management at Avon Bottoms Wildlife Area, scattered parcels in Rock County and the Footville PHG area;
- Trout Unlimited has contributed to restoration at Story Creek; and
- The Ice Age Trail Alliance and volunteers have been instrumental in developing and maintaining the popular trail segment at Montrose SIATA.

Local snowmobile clubs that have built and maintained trails and bridges on several properties and sporting groups have assisted with habitat management.

Highlights of the Draft Master Plan

The draft master plan for your review and approval balances the properties' resources and capabilities with public interest and demands. Highlights include:

- Adding six parking lots and two carry-in launch sites,
- Developing a river trail to complement the Sugar River State Trail,
- Improving the Class 2 dog training area,
- Improving hunting and cold water fishing access for mobility impaired individuals,
- Identifying four properties as having site suitability for developing a shooting range,
- Creating one large state natural area focused on protecting the floodplain forests, sloughs and oxbows along the Sugar River in Avon Bottoms, and establishing two new state natural areas on existing state lands at Albany WA and Badfish Creek WA,
- Establishing a 13,000-acre project boundary, called the Footville Wildlife Area, which will include the existing scattered fee title parcels (481 acres).

Recommendation

The department recommends NRB approval of the Sugar River Planning Group Draft Master Plan.

TABLE 1: Overview of Real Estate Recommendations for the Sugar River Planning Group
(These changes are outlined in the Draft Master Plan on the NRB Action Items map for each property).

Property	Existing Project Boundary	Proposed Project Boundary	**Changes in Project Boundary**	Existing Acquisition Goal	Proposed Acquisition Goal	**Changes in Acquisition Goal**	**Percent Complete**	Parcel Redesignations	Proposed Land Sale
Albany Wildlife Area	1,670	3,100	1,430	1,580	2,530	950	56%	570	NONE
Avon Bottoms Wildlife Area	3,775	8,516	4,741	3,007	7,957	4,950	43%	NONE	NONE
Badfish Creek Wildlife Area	1,273	1,500	227	1,262	1,412	150	81%	NONE	NONE
Brooklyn Wildlife Area	3,296	3,270	-26	3,070	3,070	0	85%	NONE	NONE
Evansville Wildlife Area	905	966	61	741	741	0	95%	NONE	NONE
Hook Lake/Grass Lake Wildlife Area	3,024	2,935	-89	2,430	2,430	0	31%	NONE	NONE
Liberty Creek Wildlife Area	1,075	625	-450	1,032	582	-450	97%	NONE	NONE
Hook Lake Bog SNA (Stand-alone SNA)	527	527	0	NA	NA	NA	NA	NONE	NONE
Montrose SIATA (Montrose Unit Only)	3,351	3,351	0	NA	NA	NA	NA	NONE	NONE
Story Creek SBP	1,301	1,272	-29	NA	NA	NA	NA	NONE	NONE
Allen Creek SBP	2,152	447	-1,705	NA	NA	NA	NA	NONE	NONE
REM-Anthony Branch	1,020	982	-38	NA	NA	NA	NA	NONE	NONE
Rock County Habitat Areas	NA	NA		NA	NA	NA	NA	NONE	30
sub totals	*23,369*	*27,491*	*4,122*	*13,122*	*18,722*	*5,600*		*570*	*30*
Footville Wildlfe Area (former PHG)	0	13,000	13,000	0	481	481		481	NONE