

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Natural Resources Board Agenda Item

SUBJECT: Tier 3 Management Plans for nine Statewide Natural Areas (SNA)

FOR: May 2016 Board meeting

TO BE PRESENTED BY: Diane Brusoe, Property Planning Section Chief and Matt Zine, State Natural Areas Biologist - Division of Fish, Wildlife and Parks

SUMMARY:

The Department has developed management plans for nine Statewide Natural Areas (SNA) located in Crawford, Grant, Lafayette, Pepin, Pierce, and Vernon counties. The nine SNAs currently total 1,342 acres of DNR fee title ownership, and are open to the public including all five nature-based outdoor activities. These natural areas were previously identified for Tier 3 management plans because they are smaller in size ranging from 50 to 338 acres, have little infrastructure (e.g., only parking areas), or have narrow property objectives and goals. The purpose of SNAs is to protect outstanding examples of Wisconsin's native landscapes, significant geological formations, and archeological sites. They also provide habitat for rare, nongame, and game species, and provide unique recreational opportunities.

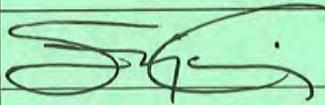
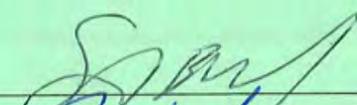
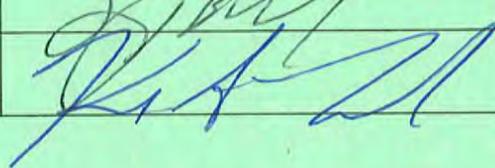
These Tier 3 management plans include information on current conditions, recreational opportunities, property and acquisition boundaries, habitat and natural community types, habitat management prescriptions, and motorized road inventories. The public was provided the opportunity to comment on these plans, having been informed of the process through regional news releases, including 41 outdoor writers, and through the Department's master planning and SNA websites. All properties are located outside of the tribal ceded territory, but nearby Native American Tribes were notified of the plan process.

Boundary modifications in the plan include reductions of the project boundaries to remove parcels that don't fit the purpose of the project and are not needed by the Department for conservation purposes. Expansions include several parcels that already have some level of land protection or may be acquired by the Department in the future to complete the project and ensure consistent management and recreational use. The overall acquisition goal for SNAs is established by the Natural Resources Board. The most recent action by the Natural Resources Board authorized an acquisition goal of 41,000 acres for Statewide Natural Areas (29,834 acres acquired to date). These Tier 3 management plans do not change the overall acquisition goal for the statewide project. All project boundary changes are outlined in the attached memo.

RECOMMENDATION: Approval of these nine property management plans per NR 44.04(3), Wis. Adm. Code, as outlined in the attached memo and plans.

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

- Background memo
- Property management plans may be viewed online at:
<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/masterplanning/tier3.html>

Approved by	Signature	Date
Natural Heritage Conservation Bureau Director - Vacant		4/19/16
Sanjay Olson, Administrator, Division of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks		4/21/16
 Cathy Stepp, Secretary		5/2/16

CORRESPONDENCE/MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 18, 2016 FILE REF: Tier3 Management Plans

TO: Natural Resources Board Members

FROM: Cathy Stepp – Secretary, Department of Natural Resources

SUBJECT: Approval of State Natural Area Tier 3 Management Plans

The Department is seeking approval for nine Statewide Natural Area (SNA) management plans. The properties are designated as Tier 3 properties for planning purposes, and total 1,342 acres currently owned and managed by the department. All proposed project boundary increases are within the NRB-approved SNA acquisition authority of 41,000 acres. Refer to Table 1 and Figure 1 for additional acreage information and project location.

Wisconsin's State Natural Areas program is the oldest and largest such program in the country, having been statutorily established in 1951 through an effort led by renowned Wisconsin conservation leaders, including Aldo Leopold. SNAs are established to protect outstanding examples of Wisconsin's native landscapes, including significant geological formations and archeological sites. Encompassing over 380,000 acres of State and partner lands, Wisconsin's SNAs are valuable for research and educational use, preserving genetic and biological diversity, providing some of the last refuges for rare plants and animals, serving as benchmark reference areas for comparison with current management approaches on other lands, and providing opportunities for nature-based recreation.

In May of 2006, the NRB approved, and the Department codified in Manual Code 2230.1, a three-tiered planning approach for Department properties. Tier 3 management plans are prepared for small, non-complex properties and are exempt from the full requirements of NR44. However, they generally follow the similar planning process and require approval by the Natural Resources Board. There are an estimated 142 department-owned "stand-alone" properties not embedded in another DNR program project area. Of these stand-alone SNAs, 113 are currently identified for Tier 3 planning over the next ten years; the nine presented here are the first group.

1. Property Descriptions

These nine SNAs were grouped together because they are all on or near the Mississippi River, are comprised of similar plant communities (primarily oak-dominated savannas and forests, and dry prairies), and thus have similar management regimes. These sites comprise some of the rarest native plant community types in the State, and subsequently, contain many rare plant and animal species. Much of the habitat work on these properties includes controlling invasive species (especially woody encroachment), prescribed burning of prairies and oak savannas/forests, and active timber management as appropriate. All DNR-owned lands within these SNAs (1,342 acres) are open for public use, including all five nature-based outdoor activities.

2. Management Plan Summary

While each property is unique, there are similarities in their native community types and management, as well as their goals and objectives. Each management plan describes the SNA, its specific management issues and trends, and the landscape in which it exists. Property goals and management objectives are presented, as are existing infrastructure, proposed changes to current

management or development, and a summary of public comments. The property plans and maps include a complete inventory of current motorized road use as required in State Statute 23.116. Associated maps are presented with archaeological and rare species information (not for public dissemination as per State Statute). Finally, a number of plans include grazing as an optional restoration tool to help meet restoration goals.

3. Public Involvement and Significant Issues of Public Interest

A 21-day public review of the draft plans occurred from December 30, 2015 to January 19, 2016. A press release was sent out to media in the South Central and West Central regions, as well as ~41 outdoor writers statewide. A news story with links to the plans was posted on the DNR's State Natural Area website, and plans and background information were posted on the DNR Master Planning webpage. The property managers contacted local partners and other potential user groups (list available upon request). None of these properties are within the Chippewa Bands' ceded territory, but other nearby Indian Tribes were notified of the management plan development.

Twenty-four comments were received by e-mail (one by phone) and most were positive and supportive of the plans and original project boundary proposals. Comments that warranted a specific response are captured in each of the respective management plans, as well as collectively posted in a single document on the Master Planning website. None of the comments were considered controversial; some identified potential concerns that were addressed in the plans. Examples include appropriateness of grazing on SNAs; concerns about the impacts of prescribed fire on lichens; and additional suggestions or questions about project boundaries.

4. Partnerships for Management

Management of these nine properties is supported through a number of active partnerships with numerous local and regional conservation organizations, public and private, and other stakeholders. Funding support for much of the management occurring is provided by the Natural Resources Foundation, the Stry Foundation of La Crosse, John and Nancy Diekelman, and others. Active habitat management and restoration partners for these properties include The West Wisconsin Land Trust, Mississippi Valley Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy, Pepin County Land Conservation Dept., Buffalo County Land Conservation Dept., Crawford County Land Conservation Dept., Lower Chippewa River Alliance, Lower Chippewa Invasives Partnership, USDA- Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and an active volunteer base that is steadily growing. Attached are three letters of support for the active co-management partnerships occurring on these SNAs for review.

5. Environmental Analysis, Conclusions and Department Recommendations

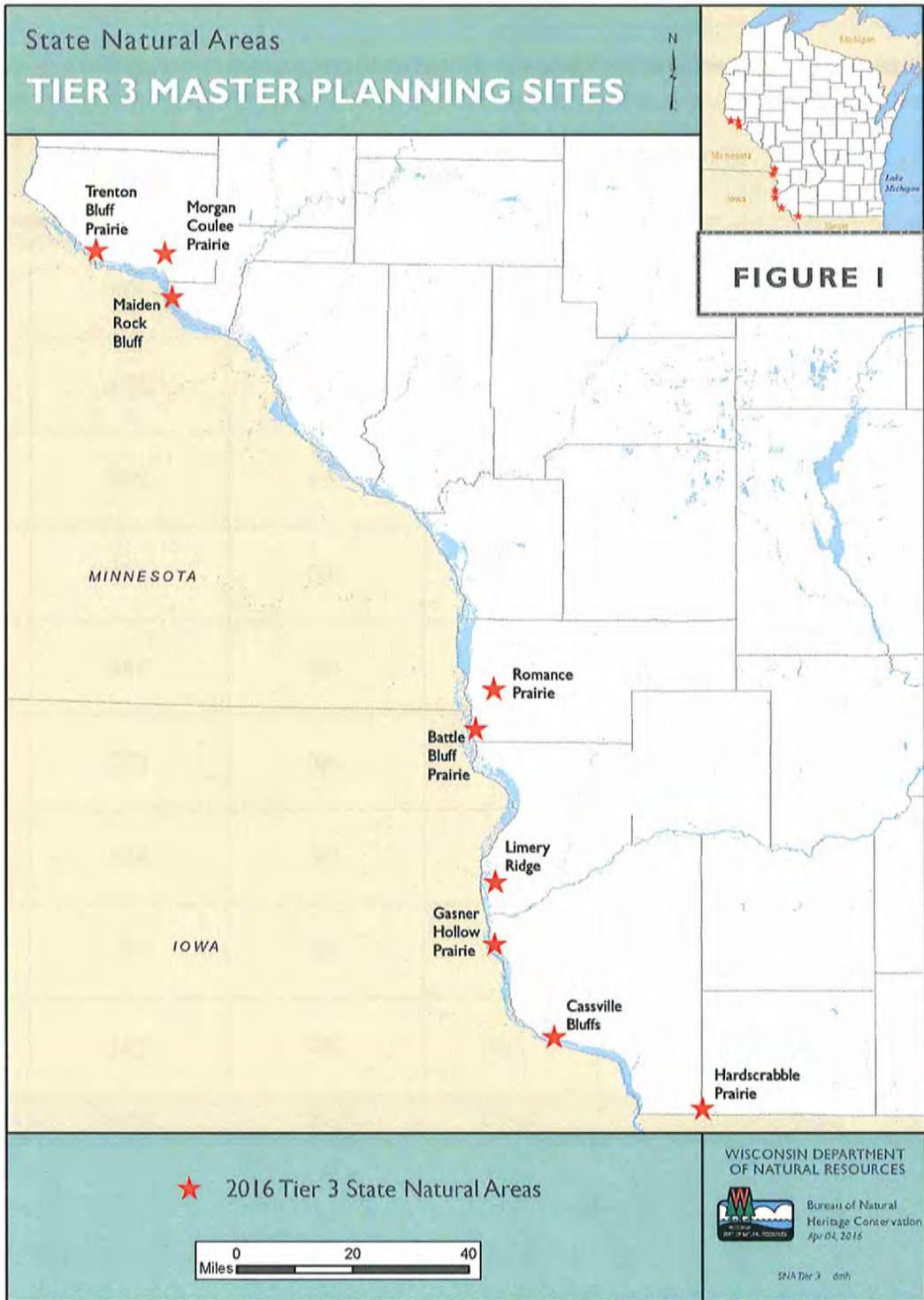
The Department of Natural Resources concludes that:

- a. Tier 3 property management plans are minor actions under s. NR150.20(1m)(k) and do not require an environmental analysis.
- b. Tier 3 property plans are exempt from the requirements of NR44 and NR1.60, but they are to be approved by the NRB per Manual Code 2230.1

Recommendation: The Department recommends Natural Resources Board approval of the nine State Natural Area Tier 3 Management Plans.

TABLE 1: Overview of Tier 3 SNAs and Boundary Modifications (acres)

State Natural Area (County - year est.)	Current DNR Fee Title	Current Project Boundary	Proposed Project Boundary	Change
Battle Bluff Prairie (Vernon - 1983)	338	338	338	0
Cassville Bluffs (Grant - 2002)	55	299	273	(26)
Gasner Hollow Prairie (Grant - 1998)	50	214	270	56
Hardscrabble Prairie (Lafayette - 1997)	168	160	168	8
Limery Ridge Savanna (Crawford - 2002)	219	465	380	(85)
Morgan Coulee Prairie (Pierce - 1996)	58	640	572	(68)
Maiden Rock Bluff (Pepin - 2004)	263	263	358	95
Romance Prairie (Vernon - 2005)	77	77	77	0
Trenton Bluff Prairie (Pierce - 1977)	114	231	231	0
Total (acres):	1,342	2,687	2,667	(20)



The data shown on this map have been obtained from various sources, and are of varying age, reliability and resolution. This map is not intended to be used for navigation, nor is this map an authoritative source of information about legal land ownership or public access. Users of this map should confirm the ownership of land through other means in order to avoid trespassing. No warranty, expressed or implied, is made regarding accuracy, applicability for a particular use, completeness, or legality of the information depicted on this map.



Crawford County Land Conservation Department
225 N. Beaumont Rd. Ste 230 · Prairie du Chien, WI 53821 · 608-326-0270

February 19, 2016

Re: Letter of Support for Limery Ridge Savanna SNA and Hogback Prairie SNA Management Plans

To whom it may concern,

On behalf of the Crawford County Land Conservation Department, I would like to officially lend my support of the proposed Management Plans for two State Natural Areas located in Crawford County. Limery Ridge Savanna SNA and Hogback Prairie SNA are two exceptional properties that should be properly protected and managed, and I feel the current management plans, as proposed, will do just that.

First, let me address the proposed management of these two sites. At a time with tighter state budgets, it is essential that continued aggressive management be properly focused to get the most "bang for the buck". These sites have had significant management conducted on-site in the last decade, so it is critical to continue (and expand) this work to restore the rare natural communities found on these properties. The native dry-prairie and oak savanna habitats that these properties protect are some of the best remaining examples of such in the county, and possibly in the state. I fully encourage the proposed land management at these sites. Limery Ridge Savanna SNA and Hogback Prairie SNA are home to many rare plant and animal species, something that must not be taken for granted. Crawford County has partnered with DNR in the management of these sites, through outreach events and prescribed burn assistance. We fully support the restoration work proposed in the management plan for both of these State Natural Areas, and plan to continue partnering with DNR to promote and enhance these sites.

I would also like to address the proposed project boundaries of these two sites. The proposed expansion at the Hogback would lead to the protection and restoration of several other high quality bluff prairies and surrounding savanna habitat. The proposed project boundary at Limery Ridge is an absolute necessity. Expanding the boundary as proposed would provide ridgetop access to staff for management purposes, but also to the public as an entry point to this property. As it stands, there is no public access to this property without crossing private land. I personally get several inquiries each year, typically right before the fall hunting season, as to how the public can legally access this property. Being so close to the city of Prairie du Chien, this property needs to be easily accessible by the public to provide outdoor recreation opportunities for our residents.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Troester". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David Troester
County Conservationist



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Upper Mississippi River NW&FR -- La Crosse District
N5727 County Road Z
Onalaska, Wisconsin 54650
Phone: (608)799-2399 ; Fax (608)799-2393

February 26, 2016

Re.: Letter of support for Western Wisconsin SNA Management Plans and project boundary expansion.

Dear Sir or Madam,

On behalf of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, I would like to officially lend my support for the revised management plans and proposed project boundary expansions of State Natural Areas (SNA) in Western Wisconsin.

As a biologist for the USFWS, I implement the Partners for Fish and Wildlife (PFW) program in Buffalo, Trempealeau, La Crosse, Vernon, Crawford and Richland Counties. The PFW program is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance to private landowners. In implementing the PFW program, the SNA's in my coverage area serve an important role in providing high quality habitats that serve as reference sites to model my restoration projects as well as serving as core areas to provide landscape scale restoration. During the revision of the PFW strategic plan this winter, I have designated potential projects that occur near our SNA's as priority projects. As such, our SNA's and projects completed through the PFW program are mutually benefitting.

In my career as a private lands biologist, I have come to appreciate the quality and uniqueness of Wisconsin's SNA program. These sites are some of the highest quality ecological community remnants in the state of Wisconsin, if not the entire Midwest. The protection, continued management and potential expansion of these sites serve a critical role for the benefit and education of future generations. Additionally, as access to private lands for recreation continues to decrease due to leasing arrangements, these SNA's are critical to the continuation of Wisconsin's outdoor heritage.

The Bureau of Natural Heritage Conservation is one of the most important conservation partners to the PFW program in my coverage area. In my time with the FWS, I have assisted the DNR on multiple prescribed burns at SNA's and have worked alongside the Bureau in providing outreach to the public in promoting the conservation of Wisconsin's rare and declining ecological communities. Please implement the revised management plans and expanded project boundaries as proposed, and I look forward to continuing this critical partnership with our Bureau of Natural Heritage Conservation.

Sincerely,


William Kiser
USFWS PFW Biologist



Pepin County Land Conservation Department

P.O. Box 39, 740 7th Ave. W., Durand, WI 54736

Phone (715)672-8665 ext. 5 FAX (715)672-8677

February 26, 2016

RE: Letter of Support for Maiden Rock Bluff SNA Master Plan

To whom it may concern,

On behalf of the Pepin County Land Conservation Department, I am writing in support of the Maiden Rock Bluff SNA Master Plan and project boundary as presently proposed.

Maiden Rock Bluff contains one of the best remnant bluff prairies in western Wisconsin and supports numerous rare species. The historic values of the property also warrant the continued protection for all citizens of Wisconsin and its many visitors. Individuals traveling to experience Maiden Rock Bluff frequently stop in the villages of Pepin County, particularly the villages of Pepin and Stockholm to shop, eat and experience the beauty of the Great River Road, a National Scenic Byway. Additionally, in the most recent 2016 Visitor's Guide to Pepin County the Maiden Rock Bluff SNA is referenced multiple times as a quality place to visit. The view overlooking the Mississippi River and Lake Pepin may be one of the best in the four-state area.

The Pepin County Land Conservation Department has and will continue to be a partner in management efforts of the Maiden Rock Bluff property and proposed project area. Most recently as a contributing partner in the December work day to assist in maintaining the unique habitat that makes the property so special.

We support the proposed project boundary to guide in future land acquisition and to protect the valuable assets it provides to our community.

Respectfully,

Chase Cummings
Pepin County Conservationist