

**SUBJECT:** Approval of the Black River State Forest Master Plan

Draft Master Plan and Environmental Analysis are located on-line at: [http://dnr.wi.gov/master\\_planning/BlackRiver/](http://dnr.wi.gov/master_planning/BlackRiver/)

**FOR:** JANUARY 2010 BOARD MEETING

**TO BE PRESENTED BY:** Peter Bakken, Teague Prichard

**SUMMARY:**

The Department requests approval of a master plan revision for the Black River State Forest. NR 44 requires Department lands to have a master plan approved by the Natural Resources Board. Wisconsin Stats. s. 28.04 requires the development of plans for State Forests to assure the practice of sustainable forestry. The master plan spells out how the land will be managed, used and developed; how it will look; and what benefits it will provide. The plan provides a vision and framework for the use, development, management, and acquisition of the forest well into the future with an emphasis on the next 15 years. The Department worked actively with state and local governments, non-governmental organizations, tribes, citizens, and businesses over four years to develop the plan. The master plan promotes diverse forest cover types and age classes; maintains nearly all existing recreational opportunities; maintains and expands protection of critical ecological communities; and increases the project boundary by approximately 19,800 acres.

The Environmental Analysis for the Black River State Forest Master Plan concludes that the plan complies with WEPA; s. 1.11 Wis. Stats./NR150.

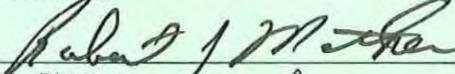
**ISSUES:** Two issues played a prominent role during the planning process: the proposed closure of 7.9 miles of ATV trail, and the proposed closure of the Robinson Beach Day Use Area. Proposals in the draft plan recommend the closure of Robinson Beach to public vehicle access based on declining use. The draft plan also recommends to keep the 7.9 miles of Wildcat Trail open pending completion of a new connector/loop in the Millston area.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The Department recommends NRB approval of the Black River State Forest Master Plan.

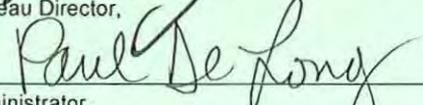
**LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS:**

- |  |   |   |          |
|--|---|---|----------|
| No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Fiscal Estimate Required                              | Yes <input type="checkbox"/>            | Attached |
| No <input type="checkbox"/>            | Environmental Assessment or Impact Statement Required | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Attached |
| No <input type="checkbox"/>            | Background Memo                                       | Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Attached |

**APPROVED:**

  
Bureau Director,

12/17/09  
Date

  
Administrator,

12/18/09  
Date

  
Secretary, Matt Frank

12-23-09  
Date

DATE: January 2010

TO: Natural Resources Board Members

FROM: Matthew Frank – Secretary, Department of Natural Resources 

SUBJECT: Black River State Forest Master Plan

The Department is seeking approval of the Black River State Forest (BRSF) Master Plan. State Statute 28.04 requires the development of master plans for state forests to assure that through the practice of sustainable forestry, each state forest is managed to provide ecological, economic, social and cultural benefits to present and future generations. Wisconsin Administrative Code NR44 requires the development and revision of master plans for properties managed by the Department of Natural Resources. Both directives require the use of scientific information and public involvement to develop a master plan. The current master plan for the BRSF was approved in 1983.

### **I. Property Description**

The Black River State Forest is located in Jackson and Clark Counties adjacent to the Black River. The Forest was established in 1957 after the federal government conveyed 59,000 acres of forestland to the Wisconsin Conservation Department in 1955. Through further land purchases, the Forest has grown to its present size of 68,237 acres, the State's third largest state forest property. The original area within the Black River State Forest, which consisted primarily of white pine and red pine, was heavily logged between 1880 and 1895 and was later settled by homesteaders seeking farmland.

Today, the Forest consists of a mix of jack pine, white pine, red pine, oak, and aspen with an increasing component of white pine. Forest management on the property is guided by a commitment to sustainable forestry, providing raw materials for Wisconsin's forest industry, and protecting unique ecological communities and habitat for wildlife.

The State Forest provides a breadth of recreational opportunities, including hunting, fishing, camping, canoeing, and a variety of motorized and non-motorized trail experiences. The most common game for hunters are whitetail deer, Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, waterfowl, bear, and a variety of small game. Fishing occurs on the Black River, East Fork of the Black River, and on various flowages found throughout the State Forest. The BRSF provides a variety of camping facilities from rustic to modern. Amenities include three family campgrounds, one group camp, one equestrian campground and two canoe campsites. Recreational trail opportunities such as cross-country skiing, hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, snowmobiling, and ATV riding are very popular on the State Forest. Currently, the BRSF has 33 miles of ATV trails which are an integral part of a region-wide trail network that provides over 230 miles of ATV trails.

Most of the land near and adjacent to the Black River State Forest is in county ownership, and enrolled in Wisconsin's County Forest Program. Other land adjacent to the forest includes private ownership, some of which is under cranberry production or enrolled in the Managed Forest Law program. The Ho-Chunk Nation is also an adjacent landowner.

### **II. Master Plan Summary**

The revised Black River State Forest Master Plan is attached for review and approval. The

Environmental Analysis (EA) is also attached.

Highlights of the BRSF Master Plan:

- The Black River State Forest has been divided into 19 Land Management Areas: three Forest Production Management Areas, two Habitat Management Areas, 12 Native Community Management Areas, and two Recreation Management Areas.
  - Forest production areas will be managed to maintain aspen in some areas, promote longer-lived species such as oak and pine in other areas, and promote conversion to native cover types such as white pine-red maple mixes where appropriate.
  - One of the primary objectives for the Native Community Management Areas is to maintain and develop older, closed canopy forests by promoting later successional species, longer-lived trees, and increased coarse woody debris.
- Ten State Natural Areas (SNAs) have been proposed; nine within Native Community Management Areas and one within the Overmeyer Hills Recreation Management Area, totaling nearly 5,000 acres. These State Natural Areas recognize high conservation value forests representing white pine habitat and older oak resources, as well as many wetland complexes. Of the 10 SNAs, six are new, and four are existing SNAs with proposed expansions.
- The Dike 17 Wildlife Habitat Management Area is proposed for expansion from 3,700 acres to 4,999 acres. This area was originally created to provide waterfowl resting and loafing areas and to provide an open landscape within the State Forest. Within this area, 2,100 acres are protected as a wildlife refuge.
- The master plan will maintain most of the existing recreational amenities; however, some changes are proposed to address environmental issues, changes in use, and changes in user preferences. The most substantial changes proposed are related to the motorized trail system.
  - The draft plan calls for significant ATV trail upgrades focusing on improving the existing trail tread conditions to reduce erosion and rutting and protect water quality, while improving rider safety.
  - The draft plan calls for working in partnership with regional landowners to authorize a trail that connects the Town of Millston to the existing Jackson County ATV trails leading to Black River Falls. This new trail connector will also create a short loop trail around Millston. The Department's contribution to this regional effort is designating approximately one mile (out of a total of approximately seven miles needed) of existing snowmobile trail for ATVs. Trail construction will be coordinated in cooperation with the various regional landowners.
  - Once the Millston Loop is authorized for use, the plan calls for closing 7.9 miles of ATV trails on the state forest, known as the Wildcat Loop. In the interim, the Wildcat Loop will remain open, with provisions for an abbreviated summer season, and to gate and temporarily close the trail more frequently based on weather events. The trail will be maintained in its current condition, with trail improvements only initiated for safety reasons or if the trail becomes impassable.
- Robinson Beach, a once popular day use area, is proposed for closure to public vehicle access and will no longer be a designated swimming area. This is due to significantly declining use over the past decade and the availability of other day use areas in close proximity that offer the same or better amenities, including the State Forest's Pigeon Creek Campground and Day Use Area, as well as a recently improved county and town day use area and beach. Robinson Beach will continue to be open for walk-in access for fishing, swimming, and other non-motorized activities. Pigeon Creek will be improved to accommodate users directed from Robinson Beach.
- The draft master plan proposes an expansion of the project boundary by approximately 19,800 acres. Seven expansion areas are proposed based on their ability to provide additional ecological,

economic and social values with respect to forest and watershed health, recreational opportunities, and improved forest access. An additional 87 acre expansion area was added after public review of the draft master plan as it was identified as an important area for protecting the confluence of Morrison and Town Line Creeks.

### **III. Public Involvement and Significant Issues of Public Interest**

The public has been involved in the Black River State Forest master planning process at key points over the past four years. Public involvement included mailings, a dedicated website, open house meetings, correspondence with local and county governments, interested organizations, user groups, and individuals, and consultation with the Ho Chunk Nation. The Department engaged the public through the master planning stages of issue identification, vision and goals, alternative concepts, preferred alternative, and the Draft Plan and Environmental Analysis.

#### ***Summary of Significant Issues of Public Concern***

A number of issues were identified early in the planning process and have been resolved in the draft plan. Two issues received significant comments during the draft plan phase: the proposed closure of 7.9 miles of ATV trail, and the proposed closure of the Robinson Beach Day Use Area. For a more detailed description of these issues, refer to the "*Summary and Response to Public Comments*" document dated December, 2009.

#### **ATV Trails**

The draft master plan that was shared with the public called for the immediate closure of 7.9 miles of ATV trail on the property. In addition, the draft plan called for a new trail connection/loop in the Millston area to offset the loss of trail miles on the property. There was both support and opposition to the draft master plan's proposal to close the 7.9 mile Wildcat Loop to ATV use.

In response to the feedback, changes were made to the draft plan to address interests and concerns. The Department maintains its proposal to participate in and contribute to the development of the proposed Millston Loop/connector trail, with the Department authorizing approximately one mile of existing snowmobile trail for ATV use out of a total of approximately seven miles needed for the entire loop trail. ATVs would only be authorized on the one mile section of trail on Department land after all landowners have fully committed to their respective trail sections and the entire trail is developed to a standard that will support ATV use.

In the interim, gates will be installed at access points of the Wildcat Trail so that the trail can be temporarily closed more frequently if conditions warrant. In addition, this section of trail will only be open for the summer season from the Friday before Memorial Day through Labor Day (with a full winter season) to avoid impacts when the trail is most sensitive to degradation.

When the new trail connection in Millston is authorized for use, the 7.9 miles of the Wildcat Trail will be closed to ATV use (2.5 miles will be retained as a designated snowmobile trail), and major wetland crossings will be restored.

If three years after the approval of the master plan by the Natural Resources Board lapse before the Millston Loop is authorized, and trail conditions on the Wildcat Loop degrade significantly, then the appropriate trail improvements, including wetland crossing upgrades and trail base improvements, will be implemented. If major improvements are implemented on the Wildcat Loop, the Millston Loop will no longer be considered, although a legal connector to the Jackson County ATV trails will still be an objective.

### Robinson Beach Closure

The master plan proposes to close Robinson Beach Day Use area to public vehicle access and channel users to more developed day use areas with similar or greater amenities in close proximity, including Pigeon Creek Campground, approximately three miles from Robinson Beach, and a nearby county and township day use area and beach. This proposal is based on a significant and steady decline in visitor use during the last ten years.

Although it will no longer be a designated swimming area, Robinson Beach will still be available for walk-in access for fishing, swimming, and other non-motorized activities. The master plan calls for removal of all improvements; however, the trail from the parking lot along Cranmore Road will be improved, and the parking lot itself will be increased in size to accommodate day users. This will provide access for those who still wish to recreate in this area at a low cost to the Department in terms of maintenance and enforcement.

Pigeon Creek will be improved to accommodate additional users directed from Robinson Beach. If use significantly increases at Pigeon Creek, then a small paved parking area may be added near the entrance of the campground. An ADA accessible parking area and walkway to the beach will be constructed, and minor improvements will be made to the swimming area.

#### **IV. Environmental Analysis (EA) Conclusions and Department Recommendations**

The Environmental Analysis assesses the potential environmental impacts of actions recommended in the Black River State Forest Master Plan.

The Department of Natural Resources concludes that:

- 1) The Department, under s. 1.11 Wis. Stats., and Ch. NR 150, Wis. Adm. Code, has the responsibility to comply with WEPA, and the authority to determine its compliance with that Act.
- 2) The Department, under s. 28.04 Wis. Stats., has the authority to plan and manage state forests.
- 3) The Department, under ss. 23.27 and 23.28, Wis. Stats., has the authority to acquire, designate, and protect State Natural Areas.

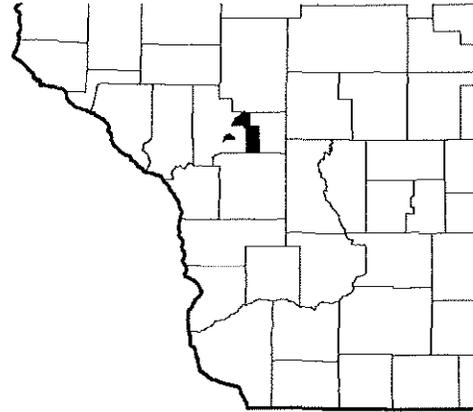
**DECISION: The Department recommends Natural Resources Board approval of the Black River State Forest Master Plan.**

# Black River State Forest

## Draft Master Plan & Environmental Analysis

### Executive Summary - January 2010

The Black River State Forest Draft Master Plan, based on four years of assessment and planning, is designed to sustain the ecological, economic, and social benefits valued by the citizens of Wisconsin. The draft plan defines how the property will be managed and the benefits provided over the next 15 year period. It outlines land management practices, recreational uses, land acquisition opportunities, and other aspects of the property's future use and development.



The Black River State Forest is located in Jackson and Clark Counties, adjacent to the Black River. The property covers approximately 68,200 acres of forest, consisting of a mix of pine, oak, aspen, and wetland/wet forest communities. Management of the property will maintain areas for timber and forest products, protect the property's valuable natural resources, and provide recreational opportunities.

Many of the habitats within the Black River State Forest support plant and animal species that are rare, endangered, or threatened within the state, or federally. The property also contains productive forestland and recreational trails that support local economies and offer visitors a place to enjoy the outdoors.

The development of the Black River State Forest Draft Master Plan has been guided by a commitment to sustainable forestry. Recreation is an important component of the state forest, and the draft plan is intended to provide sustainable recreation opportunities by maintaining the wide range of activities that currently draw visitors to the forest, including hunting, fishing, canoeing, ATV and snowmobile riding, hiking, cross-country skiing, cycling, and horseback riding.

and snowmobile riding, hiking, cross-country skiing, cycling, and horseback riding.

|   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| <b>Forest Production Management Areas</b>   | <b>46,586 acres</b> |
| Area 1: Perry Creek Basin.....              | 3,038 acres         |
| Area 2: Morrison and Levis Creek Basin..... | 29,350 acres        |
| Area 3: Robinson Creek Basin.....           | 14,198 acres        |
| <b>Habitat Management Areas</b>             | <b>9,276 acres</b>  |
| Area 4: Jack Pine.....                      | 4,277 acres         |
| Area 5: Dike 17 Wildlife.....               | 4,999 acres         |
| <b>Native Community Management Areas</b>    | <b>9,979 acres</b>  |
| Area 6: Upper Black River*.....             | 1,909 acres         |
| Area 7: Arbutus Oaks*.....                  | 215 acres           |
| Area 8: Castle Mound Pine Forest*.....      | 171 acres           |
| Area 9: East Fork of the Black River.....   | 1,083 acres         |
| Area 10: Ketchum Creek Headwaters*.....     | 581 acres           |
| Area 11: Paradise Valley Pines.....         | 669 acres           |
| Area 12: Peallands*.....                    | 1,203 acres         |
| Area 13: Calfish Eddy Terraces*.....        | 745 acres           |
| Area 14: Robinson/Millston Pines*.....      | 626 acres           |
| Area 15: Settlement Road Pine Swamp.....    | 156 acres           |
| Area 16: Stanton Pines.....                 | 971 acres           |
| Area 17: Starlight Wetlands*.....           | 1,650 acres         |
| <b>Recreation Management Areas</b>          | <b>2,396 acres</b>  |
| Area 18: Overmeyer Hills*.....              | 2,241 acres         |
| Area 19: Campgrounds and Day Use.....       | 155 acres           |
| * Includes a designated State Natural Area  |                     |

#### Land Management Areas

The Black River State Forest has been divided into 19 Land Management Areas: three Forest Production Management Areas, two Habitat Management Areas, 12 Native Community Management Areas, and two Recreation Management Areas.

Each management area describes a unique landscape or management focus that considers soils, topography, community type and other factors which shape the future management for each area. Each management area has specific long- and short-term objectives that articulate the future desired condition based on the ecological capabilities of the area and property goals.

The general management objective for Forest Production Management Areas is the sustainable production of forest products. However, forest production areas also meet a wide range of ecological and recreation objectives. In these cases, management practices are modified to be compatible with and support these multiple

objectives. In Habitat Management Areas, management activities provide or enhance habitats that support specific species of plants and animals, while still allowing for forest management. The primary management objective for Native Community Management Areas is the representation and perpetuation of native plant communities and other aspects of native biological diversity. Management activities are designed to achieve land management objectives through natural processes whenever possible. Only those areas of highest value for protection or community restoration were selected. Recreation Management Areas are focused on providing and maintaining land and water areas and facilities for outdoor public recreation or education.

**Productive Forest Land**

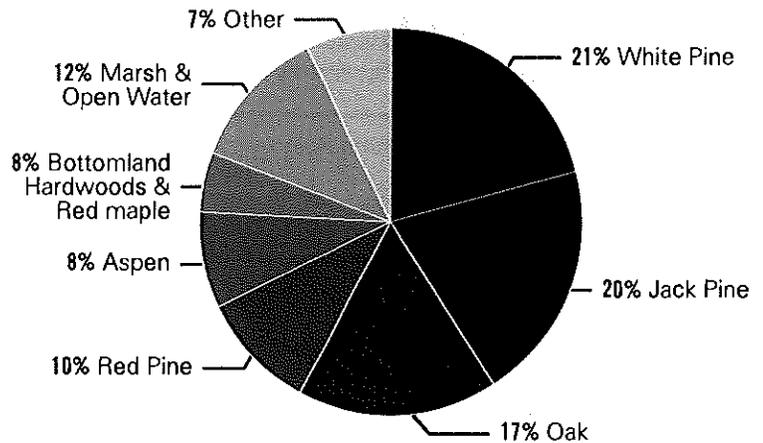
Under the proposed plan, 92% of the property's forested acres (52,500 acres) will be available for active sustainable forest management to produce forest products. This equates to 77% of the entire property. Eight percent, or 5,240 acres, of the entire property is designated to be passively managed allowing natural processes to predominate. Some of the passively managed areas are forested, but many have not been actively managed in the past due to their lack of merchantable timber, or their steep, wet, or otherwise inaccessible nature. The designation of some forested acres as passive management equates to approximately 6-8% of the forested acres on the property being removed from management. Non-forested areas, such as open water and wetlands, account for the balance of acreage unavailable for forest management.

For the near-term the forest will continue to produce pulp and sawtimber in similar proportions that it does today. As the forest matures over the next 50 to 100 years, there will be a corresponding shift to more sawlog and lumber products rather than pulpwood.

**Changes in Forest Cover**

Currently, pine species dominate the Black River State Forest. This includes white, jack, and red pine. Oak and aspen are also prominent forest types. Other species include those adapted to the lowland and swamp conditions, such as swamp/bottomland hardwoods, tamarack and black spruce. Aspen is predicted to stay relatively stable, while jack pine and oak are expected to decrease slightly. Red maple and white pine are expected to increase.

Forest production areas will be managed to maintain a strong component of aspen in some areas, promote longer-lived species such as oak and pine in other areas, and promote conversion to native cover types such as white pine-red maple mixes where appropriate.



Current forest cover on the Black River State Forest.

Within the two habitat management areas, current forest composition and age structure will not change dramatically. In the Jack Pine Habitat Management Area, jack pine barrens habitat and associated rare species will be maintained and increased. Within the Dike 17 Habitat Management Area, the open landscape will be maintained through timber harvest and prescribed burning.

Native community management areas have the greatest potential for change in forest composition and age structure. One of the primary objectives for these areas is to maintain and develop older, closed canopy forests. This includes promoting later successional species and encouraging characteristics of old growth forests, including more closed canopies, longer-lived tree species, and increased coarse woody debris.

**State Natural Area Designations**

Ten State Natural Areas (SNAs) have been proposed on the Black River State Forest; nine within Native Community Management Areas, and one within the Overmeyer Hills Recreation Management Area, totaling nearly 5,000 acres.

Of the ten SNAs, six are new, and four are existing SNAs with proposed expansions.

Sites were chosen that contribute to critical habitat for rare species, provide ecological reference areas, or which contain significant geological or archaeological features. In many cases, the Black River State Forest offers the best representations of these unique attributes within the central sand plains ecological landscape and in the state.

### Recreation

Current recreational facilities serve a wide user-base and provide opportunities for camping, swimming, boating, fishing, hunting, and a variety of motorized and non-motorized trail activities. The draft master plan will maintain most of the existing recreational amenities; however, some changes are proposed to address environmental issues and changes in use. Changes are designed to meet the demands of today's forest visitor and to improve the quality of the state forest's amenities. Proposals addressed in the draft plan include increasing the number of electrical sites and constructing a new shop and office building at the modern campground, and enhancing the motorized trail system to address environmental concerns, increased usage, and trail connectivity.



#### *Motorized Trails*

The state forest's motorized trail system for snowmobiles, ATVs and licensed dual-sport motorcycles is an integral part of a several hundred mile region-wide trail network. Currently, much of the motorized trail system on the Black River State Forest is experiencing environmental challenges due to the significant number of wetland crossings and sandy soils which are extremely prone to erosion. Many of these issues date back to the initial development of the trails, which were originally designed as snowmobile trails for use in winter months. ATVs have become increasingly popular on the state forest, and the trails have experienced a subsequent increase in use since the late 1980s. Because the trails are

now heavily used in the summer months, trail degradation has greatly increased over the past several years.

The draft master plan attempts to address these environmental concerns to ensure a safe and sustainable motorized trail system through implementation of the following objectives:

- Meet Department trail standards while establishing a sustainable trail system
- Upgrade and maintain the existing trail infrastructure
- Minimize water quality and wetland impacts
- Reduce soil erosion
- Increase rider safety
- Maintain and improve connectivity to the regional trail network
- Decrease user conflicts by separating incompatible uses

#### *Motorized Trail Changes - Highlights from the Draft Plan*

In general, changes to the motorized trail system will focus on improving trail tread, improving wetland crossings, reducing erosion and rutting, and protecting water quality, while improving rider experience and safety. The trail width in some locations will be narrowed where it has expanded from its original size due to heavy use in recent years. Restoration of vegetation in these areas will create a more natural appearance along the trail. Changes also focus on reducing user conflicts while maintaining or improving connectivity to the regional trail network. More specific proposals in the draft plan include:

- Participate in and coordinate the cooperative effort to identify and authorize an ATV trail that connects the Town of Millston to the existing Jackson County ATV trails leading to Black River Falls.
- Maintain the existing 33 miles of ATV trails on the property in the short-term, and close 7.9 miles of the Wildcat Trail to ATV use when the new trail connector in Millston is authorized for use.
- Close a 1.8 mile snowmobile only loop to reduce user conflicts with the silent sports area.

- Remove horse access on the motorized trail system, except for a 1,500 foot segment.
- Re-route a short section of the trail west of Stanton Creek Road to address erosion issues.
- Change 4.3 miles of ATV trail near Castle Mound to a summer only trail to be consistent with the designation of the adjacent Jackson County Trails.

### **Wildlife Management**

The Black River State Forest supports a great diversity of wildlife species, including game, non-game, furbearer, and bird species common to Wisconsin. The state forest also has numerous endangered, threatened and rare species, and several Species of Special Concern. Wildlife management focuses on maintaining diverse and healthy wildlife populations by managing the composition and structure of forested and non-forested habitats. Wildlife habitat values are further assured by the wildlife biologists working with foresters on timber sales and other land management activities.

The Karner blue butterfly (*Lycaeides melissa samuelis*) (Kbb) was listed as a federally endangered species in December of 1992. The Kbb inhabits oak/pine barrens, a globally rare vegetative community that exists on the Black River State Forest. A Karner Blue Butterfly Recovery Plan was published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2003. That plan designates recovery properties across the Kbb range and assigns population goals for each property. The Black River State Forest is included in that listing with a goal of one population with at least 3,000 Kbb (as stated in the 2003 Recovery Plan). Several potential recovery sites have been identified on the forest. When additional information has been collected on Kbb populations and management potential, a Recovery Implementation Plan will be developed. The property will follow the most current version of the Kbb Recovery Implementation Plan, along with the Karner Blue Butterfly Habitat Conservation Plan.

### **Boundary Expansion**

The draft master plan proposes an expansion of the project boundary for the Black River State Forest by approximately 19,800 acres. Seven expansion areas were selected based on their ability to sustain additional ecological, economic and social value for the property and region with respect to forest and watershed health, recreational opportunities, and improved forest access. If the boundary expansion were acquired in its entirety, the property would encompass approximately 88,000 acres.

### **Environmental Analysis**

The Environmental Analysis (EA) assesses the potential impacts of actions recommended in the Black River State Forest Draft Master Plan, ranging from land acquisition and facility development to forest management and operation. The EA also includes an examination of the management alternatives considered and the public review process used during the development of the master plan.

The EA for this plan concludes that the implementation of the master plan provides positive, ecological, social, and economic benefits to the region with minimal adverse impacts.

### **Public Participation**

The public has been involved in the Black River State Forest master planning process at key points within the past four years. Public involvement included mailings, a dedicated website, open house meetings, and correspondence with local and county governments, tribes, interested organizations, user groups, and individuals. The Department engaged the public through the master planning stages of issue identification, vision and goals, alternative concepts, preferred alternative, and the Draft Plan and Environmental Analysis.

# BLACK RIVER STATE FOREST MASTER PLAN SUMMARY AND RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENTS DECEMBER 2009

## **The Public Review**

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources released the Draft Master Plan and Environmental Analysis for the Black River State Forest for public review on May 6, 2009. The 46-day comment period ended on June 20, 2009. Two hundred hard copies of the Draft Master Plan were published, with 61 direct-mailed to interested stakeholders. The additional copies were made available at a public meeting and at public offices, libraries, and by request. The master plan was accessible electronically on the Department's web site: [http://dnr.wi.gov/master\\_planning/BlackRiver/](http://dnr.wi.gov/master_planning/BlackRiver/). An additional 208 individuals received a cover letter announcement and executive summary of the draft master plan.

On May 28, 2009 a public informational meeting was held in Black River Falls. Participants included local residents and landowners, business representatives, governmental officials, recreational organizations and department staff. Prior to the public meeting, one-to-one contacts were also made with several partners and stakeholders, and consultation was conducted with the Ho Chunk Nation.

During the comment period, a total of 57 comments were received. Respondents represented forty-one individuals, four stakeholders/partners, five governmental agencies and a newspaper.

## **Summary of Comments**

In general, the future use and management outlined in the Black River State Forest Draft Master Plan are supported by the public. It is important to note that most areas of the plan received no comments or few comments, including the proposals related to camping, public access, equestrian trails, and hiking/biking/cross-country ski trails.

The values expressed during the public comment period include: protecting the water resource and scenic qualities of the Black River and tributaries, maintaining public access for canoeing, enhancing the health and productivity of the forests, protecting high conservation value forests, and providing a range of recreational opportunities.

These objectives are consistent with interests expressed at the beginning of the planning process and are represented in the property's Vision and Goals.

The proposed changes to the ATV trail system and the proposal to reduce the level of development at Robinson Beach Day

use Area received well over 75% of all comments on the draft plan.

Where appropriate, adjustments were made to the draft plan to address feedback received.

Stakeholders were particularly interested in the motorized recreational opportunities on the Black River State Forest and offered a number of suggestions to the draft plan.

## ***Summary of Motorized Recreation Comments***

Approximately half of all comments received on the draft plan addressed motorized recreation in some manner with feedback being mixed particularly regarding ATV access.

Stakeholder support existed for a number of the ATV proposals including maintaining the regional trail link within Jackson County and between Jackson and Clark counties, maintaining the existing trail connection leading directly to a county campground, supporting the local economies, upgrading the trails to make them more sustainable and relocating a portion of the horse trail to reduce conflict between ATV and equestrians. Stakeholders and partners supported the ATV trail tread and wetland crossing improvements as outlined in the draft master plan, which meet Department standards.

There was support from stakeholders, and a willingness to work in partnership, to locate and authorize a trail to connect the regional trail network at the southern end of the forest near the Town of Millston to address a long standing gap (missing connector link).

There was interest in maintaining a short loop trail at the southern end of the Forest and trail network.

There was both support and opposition to the draft plan's proposal to close the 7.9 mile Wildcat Loop.

Some stakeholders who opposed the Wildcat Loop closure commented that it should not be closed until a new Millston Loop is approved. Concern existed that the partners required to designate and construct the Millston Loop are not yet in place and the trail may not become a reality.-

Those who supported the Wildcat Loop closure generally referenced the impacts to the environment, including wetland and erosion impacts, and to other recreational users, including the adjacent Overmeyer Hills Recreation Area, as their basis.

### *Department's Response*

The Department remains committed to maintaining and improving the regional motorized trail system through wise management of the portions which traverse through the Black River State Forest. This includes reducing the wetland impacts on the trails and increasing the stability of the highly erodible portions of the trail. These will be accomplished by meeting all departmental standards and working closely with partners.

The Department is committed to supporting a short loop trail near the Town of Millston by keeping the Wildcat Loop open during the short term and working to authorize the development of the Millston Loop in the long term. When the Millston Loop is open, then the Wildcat Loop will close.

In the interim, the Wildcat Loop will remain open from the Friday before Memorial Day through Labor Day and during the traditional winter season. Trail grooming will continue at current levels, but no major development will occur except for safety reasons or if the trail becomes impassable. During this period, gates will be installed at access points to the Wildcat Loop, and trail conditions will be monitored more frequently and the trail may be closed temporarily based on trail conditions.

If three years after approval of the master plan by the Natural Resources Board lapse before the Millston Loop is authorized, and trail conditions on the Wildcat Loop degrade significantly, then the appropriate trail improvements, including wetland crossing upgrades and trail base improvements, will be implemented. If major improvements are implemented on the Wildcat Loop, the Millston Loop will no longer be considered, although a legal connector to the Jackson County ATV trails will still be an objective.

After the Wildcat Loop is closed to public motorized recreational use, the trail will be used for management purposes and major wetland sections will be restored.

A 1.8 mile snowmobile only section of the Wildcat Loop will be closed immediately; no comments in opposition to this were received.

A 0.1 mile segment of trail will be authorized if a snowmobile only trail presently located on private land is designated for ATV use in the future and will provide a connection to the current Black River State Forest motorized trail system.

### *Summary of Robinson Beach Comments*

Public feedback related to Robinson Beach favored keeping the facility open. Comments opposing its closure include:

- Robinson Beach is an affordable attraction in the local area.
- Robinson provides the nicest beach in the area and has a long history of use by families.
- A proposal to manage the facility through a volunteer group was offered.
- Continued access for fishing was questioned.

### *Department's Response*

The Department recommends that the proposal to reduce amenities at Robinson remain unchanged from the draft plan. Minor changes were made related to the planned developments at the nearby Pigeon Creek Campground and Day Use Area to reflect the interest of Robinson Beach users. ADA accessibility will be improved at Pigeon Creek beach in the future. Similarly, an expanded parking area may be added to Pigeon Creek if public use significantly increases.

Foot access will continue to be allowed to Robinson Beach. The existing small graveled parking area along Cranmore Road will be increased in size to provide access to the south end of Robinson Beach Pond. This will provide access for those who still wish to recreate in this area at a low cost to the Department in terms of maintenance and enforcement. If erosion becomes an issue, the existing foot path from the parking lot along Cranmore Road to Robinson Beach Pond will be upgraded to a moderately developed trail.

The significant decline in use coupled with a beach area offered at Pigeon Creek Campground within three miles lends strong support for this recommendation. Use at Robinson Beach has declined from well over 100 vehicles on a weekend day in the early 1990's to currently averaging 5-10 cars on a weekend day. Closing this beach allows its use to be redirected to Pigeon Creek Campground which creates several management efficiencies for the state forest. In addition, a second public swimming beach, managed by the Town of Millston, is located one mile away.

Department surveys conducted during the summer of 2009, in response to stakeholders concerns of the original proposal, identified strong support and visitor satisfaction with the Pigeon Creek's beach facility. The vast majority of respondents believe Pigeon Creek is a suitable alternative to Robinson and some prefer its features over Robinson. Requests for improvements at Pigeon were generally minor such as more sand on the beach, more picnic tables, and better accessibility for ADA.

## **Topics Receiving Minor Comments**

### ***Land Management Comments***

Land management feedback did not focus on any one particular issue, but covered a range of topics from wildland fires in pine areas, expansion of the Dike 17 Wildlife Area, invasive species management, and management of the oak resource, old growth forests and the Jack Pine Habitat Area. Specifically,

- A question was raised regarding the definition of potentially productive acreage.
- Clarification was requested on invasive species management strategies.
- Some stakeholders recognized the importance of the high conservation value forests on the property including the Jack Pine Habitat Area and supported the proposed state natural area designations.

### ***Department's Response***

The Department supports the land management recommendations put forth in the draft master plan.

A number of elements were changed to clarify management direction including additional language to clarify forest production acreage and how specific areas will be managed, minor edits to recognize and reference Best Management Practices for Invasives and potential future methods for controlling invasives, and map updates to demonstrate the correlation of State Natural Areas with Native Community Management Areas.

### ***Boundary Expansion Comments***

The public provided consistent and strong support for the project boundary expansion proposed in the draft master plan. People described the Black River Corridor and the East Fork of the Black River as two ecologically important areas due to their high intrinsic ecological, recreational and aesthetic values. Some questioned how future acquisitions may be managed, especially for recreational values. Others offered additional expansion areas for consideration. No opposition to the boundary expansion was received.

### ***Department's Response***

The Department continues to support the recommended boundary expansion proposal with one minor addition of 87 acres.