Form 1100-001
(R 2/11)

NATURAL RESOURCES BOARD AGENDA ITEM

Item No. 3.B.1

SUBJECT: Approval of the Master Plan for Sandhill, Wood County & Meadow Valley Wildlife Areas

FOR: OCTOBER 2011 **BOARD MEETING**

TO BE PRESENTED BY / TITLE: Tom Hauge & Neal Paisley

SUMMARY:

The 90,000-acre Work Unit is located in west central WI and includes Sandhill, Wood County and Meadow Valley Wildlife Areas. While the DNR has management responsibility for all three properties, only Sandhill is entirely under Department ownership. Wood County WA is owned by Wood County and managed under a long-term lease with Wood County; Meadow Valley WA is largely federal land managed by the DNR under a Cooperative Agreement with USFWS.

These properties are notable for the large wetlands with open bogs, shrub swamps, impoundments and sedge meadows, which are of Upper Midwest/Regional significance. The properties have significant opportunities for protection, management or restoration of barrens, floodplain forest, white pine-red maple swamp, and Central Sands pine-oak forest. The properties' location among other significant tracts of public land provides unique large-scale management opportunities. Management to support upland hunting, waterfowl hunting, trapping and wildlife viewing focuses largely on habitat management; no significant facility development is proposed.

Proposed boundary expansions, totaling 2,513 acres, are as follows: Sandhill WA - 1,668 ac; Wood County WA - 481 ac Meadow Valley WA - 364 ac.

The Department consulted with both the USFWS and Wood County Advisory Committee throughout the master planning process; both support this plan. The Department also hosted a public open house on July 27th to receive comments on the draft plan. Responses at the meeting and during the public comment period were favorable and are summarized in the attached memo. Master Plan documents can be viewed online at: dnr.wi.gov/master_planning/sandhill/.

RECOMMENDATION: Board approval of the master plan per NR 44.04(3), including approval of the boundary changes.

LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS:

No	☑	Fiscal Estimate Required	Yes ☐	Attached
No	☐	Environmental Assessment or Impact Statement Required	Yes ☑	Attached
No	☐	Background Memo	Yes ☑	Attached

APPROVED:

Tom Hauge — Bureau Director, Tom Hauge — Date 9/16/11

Kurt Thiede — Administrator, Kurt Thiede — Date 9/16/11

Cathy Stepp — Secretary, Cathy Stepp — Date 9/19/11

cc: NRB Liaison
DNR Rules Coordinator

State of Wisconsin
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
101 S. Webster Street
Box 7921
Madison WI 53707-7921

Scott Walker, Governor
Cathy Stepp, Secretary
Telephone 608-266-2621
FAX 608-267-3579
TTY Access via relay - 711

WISCONSIN
DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES

DATE: September 16, 2011

TO: Natural Resources Board

FROM: Cathy Stepp

SUBJECT: Sandhill-Meadow Valley Work Unit Master Plan & Environmental Assessment

I recommend that the Natural Resources Board approve the master plan for Sandhill, Wood County and Meadow Valley Wildlife Areas. The master plan outlines management and public use that supports the properties' vision and goals listed below. Master plan documents can be viewed online at: dnr.wi.gov/master_planning/sandhill/.

This memo takes a closer look at our partnership with USFWS and Wood County, the proposed boundary expansions, and a summary of public comments received. The attached master plan summary describes the properties' significance, general management and acreages, and includes a map to outline the proposed boundary expansions.

Vision
The Sandhill-Meadow Valley Work Unit properties maintain a rich biological environment distinguished by an interspersion of large blocks of upland forest and wetlands. These properties are of statewide significance for migratory birds and for conservation of rare species and natural communities, as well as serving as a regional destination for hunters, trappers, and wildlife watchers. In addition, the Sandhill Wildlife Area plays an important, unique role as a wildlife research area and as a statewide resource for outdoor education.

Goals
Management goals to meet the vision for this group of properties are:

- Maintain the extensive flowages and associated wetlands critical for migratory and resident wildlife populations.
- Provide abundant early succession forest habitat important for primary game and non-game species; with the secondary benefit of producing forest products to support the local economy.
- To support wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), protect, maintain, and restore rare natural communities and habitats including: dry pine-oak forest, pine/oak barrens, white pine-red maple swamp, peatlands and shrub swamp.
- Provide abundant, high quality opportunities for hunting, trapping, wildlife viewing and other compatible outdoor recreation activities; with opportunities to experience these pursuits in a remote setting with limited vehicle access.
- Provide on-site training and education opportunities at Sandhill Wildlife Area to sustain and enhance outdoor recreation skills and appreciation.
- Promote research at Sandhill Wildlife Area that is relevant and valuable to statewide and national resource management.

Government-to-Government Partnerships

Government-to-government contact was maintained with federal, state, and local governments. Considering the extent of leased land on the Work Unit, representatives of the USFWS, and the Wood County Wildlife Area

Advisory Committee were consulted and invited to comment on all phases of master plan development. Each organization received an advance copy of documents that went to the public.

The property supervisor met annually with the USFWS, and on an as-needed basis. The Fish and Wildlife Serviee commented on the important role of the cooperative agreement, the emphasis on sedge meadow, and the need for map edits and other minor edits for clarifieation.

Additionally, the property supervisor attended quarterly Wood County Advisory Committee meetings, and as needed. The Wood County Advisory Committee and property supervisor communicated regularly throughout the process, and as such, they did not submit formal written comments.

Boundary Expansions

Sandhill Wildlife Area

It is reeommended to expand the boundary to include **1,668 acres** along the Yellow River corridor between Dexterville and Babcock and between County Hwy X and Hwy 80, excluding residential areas. The proposed expansion encompasses nearly five miles of river corridor and associated uplands, and would abut the Yellow River Floodplain Forest SNA (No. 580).

The Yellow River is a stream of extremely low gradient, with many meanders, oxbows, sloughs, and ponds. Floodplain forest, also known as bottomland hardwoods, is the predominate natural community. Also present are scattered populations of native conifers in a lowland hardwood ecosystem. This situation is extremely rare in Wisconsin and adds much diversity to the floodplain. The Yellow River corridor is noted for its conservation significance in both the *Biotic Inventory* and *Land Legacy* reports.

Wood County Wildlife Area

The proposed **481-acre** expansion creates a corridor that would tie together Wood County Wildlife Area and Jackson County Forest Land. Public access to the adjacent Jackson County Forest and Meadow Valley lands is very limited. Currently, the only access is from the north via Eckern Road. The proposed expansion would allow non-motorized access from the east along Cranberry Road.

The expansion would also proteet a conifer swamp community, including black spruce and tamarack swamp. As noted in the *Biotic Inventory*, Central Wisconsin conifer swamps constitute highly significant habitat for many northern birds, some of which are rare or highly localized in southern Wisconsin. This conifer swamp community also provides habitat for a viable population of snowshoe hare on the southern fringe of its range in Wisconsin. The expansion is adjacent to an existing SNA, Hog Island Tamaracks

Meadow Valley Wildlife Area

It is reeommended to expand the boundary approximately **364 acres** to secure a portion of Dead Creek Old Forest Area (NHI Primary Site MV07, *Biotic Inventory*) not currently included in the property boundary. This site contains Monroe County's most intact occurrence of the regionally restricted white pine-red maple swamp community, and several rare plants.

Summary of Public Comments

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources released the Draft Sandhill-Meadow Valley Work Unit Master Plan and Environmental Assessment for public review on July 11, 2011; deadline to receive public comments was August 12, 2011. Thirteen people signed in at the July 27, 2011 open house; three left written comments. An additional eight comments were submitted by mail and email.

Comments reflect agreement on the importance of wetland management for migratory birds and of providing

quality food sources in the refuge areas. There is support to maintain the refuge areas, especially on Sandhill Wildlife Area, that provide a resting area for countless waterfowl including ducks, geese, Sandhill cranes and swans.

There is interest in continued management that promotes dry land trapping, and support for the early succession management emphasis that will benefit ruffed grouse, woodcock and other early succession wildlife species.

Several comments reflect the need to get more people, especially kids, interested in the outdoors. There is enthusiasm for multiple uses and educational opportunities to draw people to the properties as well as continued support to maintain Sandhill Wildlife Area as a research area.

Two comments noted a preference to retain year-round camping. The Department responded that limiting camping to designated areas September through December to support fall hunting seasons, and during spring turkey hunting is consistent with the purpose of wildlife areas and continues the long standing tradition of hunting camps on the properties. Year-round camping opportunities are offered in the region, including at Black River State Forest.

Several comments also acknowledge the cutting of funds and positions within the Department, and the need to consider voluntary help to accomplish management objectives.

We received one comment related to the proposed boundary expansions. The comment was in support of expansions, with emphasis placed on the Yellow River and Hemlock Creek acquisitions.