

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

**SUBJECT:** Approval of an amendment to the Black River State Forest master plan

**FOR:** March 2013 Board meeting

**TO BE PRESENTED BY:** Peter Bakken, Property Supervisor and Amy Mercer, State Forest Associate Planner

**SUMMARY:**

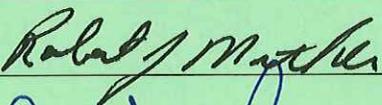
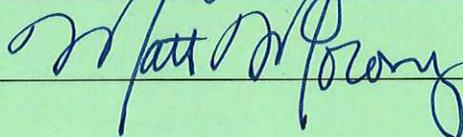
The Department requests approval of an amendment to the master plan for the Black River State Forest. A proposed amendment to the 2010 Black River State Forest Master Plan would convert an equestrian campground and associated equestrian trails into an outdoor rustic group camp. The equestrian campground, constructed shortly after the approval of the 1983 master plan, has had low use for several years. In addition, public comments indicate that the trails are less than desirable. However, the Department is significantly limited in the changes and improvements that can be made to the existing equestrian trails on the property due to the hydrology of the site. Therefore, the quality of riding at this location will remain the same as the current situation. While demand is low for the equestrian camping and horse trails at Black River State Forest, there is a high demand by the public for group camping options. The campground conversion would be implemented for the 2013 season and would be available on the reservation system after Memorial Day through December 1.

Anticipated benefits include the development of a new niche for the Black River State Forest. While there are multiple equestrian camping opportunities in the surrounding area, there are no other rustic group camping opportunities available. This new niche is likely to significantly increase visitation and revenue. No significant adverse impacts are expected from the proposed changes. There will be a minimal impact on equestrian users as significant trails and camping opportunities have been expanding in the surrounding area.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The Department recommends approval of the plan amendment to allow the campground conversion to be completed.

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

- Background memo
- Response Summary
- Draft Amendment
- N/A

Approved by	Signature	Date
Robert Mather, Bureau Director		2/27/2013
Paul DeLong, Administrator		2/27/13
Cathy Stepp, Secretary		3/6/13

DATE: February 27, 2013  
TO: Natural Resource Board  
FROM: Secretary Cathy Stepp  
SUBJECT: Black River State Forest Master Plan Amendment

Thank you in advance for considering the approval of a Master Plan amendment for the Black River State Forest. The Department sees the proposed recreational conversion as a win-win for the region and for the State of Wisconsin and recommends approval.

A proposed amendment to the 2010 Black River State Forest Master Plan would convert an equestrian campground and associated equestrian trails into an outdoor rustic group camp. The equestrian campground, constructed shortly after the approval of the 1983 master plan, has had low use for several years. While demand is low for the equestrian camping and horse trails at Black River State Forest, there is a high demand by the public for group camping options. The campground conversion would be implemented for the 2013 season and would be available on the reservation system after Memorial Day through December 1.

Anticipated benefits include the development of a new niche for the Black River State Forest. While there are multiple equestrian camping opportunities in the surrounding area, there are no other rustic group camping opportunities available. This new niche is likely to significantly increase visitation and revenue. No significant adverse impacts are expected from the proposed changes. There will be a minimal impact on equestrian users as significant trails and camping opportunities have been expanding in the surrounding area.

A notably high number of comments (46) were received on the proposed amendment during the public comment period given the current low levels of use. Comments provided reasonable and well thought out rationale for some of the recent trends, the current conditions, as well as options that could be considered to maintain equestrian use in some form. Many respondents noted the trails were less than desirable and suggested that improvements should be made in order to increase visitation. However, the Department is significantly limited in the changes and improvements that can be made to the existing equestrian trails on the property due to the hydrology of the site. Therefore, the quality of riding at this location will remain the same as the current situation. It is also notable that many comments were received from respondents who had not visited the Black River State Forest nor utilized the equestrian resources.

**The Department recommends approval of the plan amendment to allow the campground conversion to be completed.**

Thank you.

Cc: Paul DeLong, AD/5  
Bob Mather, FR/4  
Teague Prichard, FR/4  
Jim Warren, FR/4  
Dan Schuller, PR/6

**Black River State Forest (Jackson County)  
Proposed Amendment to the Master Plan  
Conversion of Equestrian Campground to Outdoor Group Camp  
Summary and Response to Public Comments  
January 2013**

The proposed Amendment, alternatives considered and impacts can be found at: <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/stateforests/blackriver/amendment.html>.

### **Public Review Process for the Plan Amendment**

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources released a proposed amendment to the Black River State Forest (BRSF) Master Plan for public review on November 1, 2012. The amendment proposes to convert an existing equestrian campground to an outdoor group campground. The 30-day comment period ended on November 30, 2012. A statewide news release was issued to notify the public about the proposed master plan amendment. Documentation including the proposed amendment, various alternatives and impacts, and maps were posted online on the BRSF DNR web page. An email was sent to over 2,200 individuals that are included on the BRSF public and partner email list. The news release was published and distributed on the Department's web page and external newsletter. In addition, articles appeared in the Country Today (Jackson County) newspaper on November 27, 2012 and in the Jackson County Chronicle on November 15th. Personal contact was made with Jackson County Parks and Forestry and Wisconsin Horse Council.

### **Summary of Comments on the Proposed Amendment**

A total of 46 comments were received during the public comment period. A small number of comments were in favor of converting the equestrian campground to an outdoor group campground. However, the majority of comments opposed closing or converting the existing equestrian campground to another use. It should be noted that many of the respondents commented that they had not yet ridden or camped at BRSF and based their response solely on the written materials and other personal experiences.

Those opposed to the campground conversion cited a number of reasons that BRSF is a desirable location for camping and riding, including the following:

- Location was described as a beautiful and quiet area to ride horses
- Camping facilities are nice, especially with recent upgrades including new restrooms
- Trails were described as level terrain with sandy soils allowing for quick drying after rain events and also making them desirable particularly for riding young horses and cart drivers
- Trails were recently separated from portions also used by ATVs

#### **Decline in use and poor existing trail conditions**

Reasons given for the decline in use of the campground include extreme weather conditions (and insects) in recent years, the weak economy, and a need for trail improvements. A number of respondents recognized and commented that the trails on BRSF are less than desirable because significant portions of the trail are located on paved town roads or roadside ditches, highway

crossings, in close proximity to ATV trails and there are few short loops.

#### **Quality of nearby equestrian resources**

Several comments acknowledged the number of high quality nearby equestrian resources or other Department owned properties around the state. Wildcat Mountain State Park, Kettle Moraine South, and Kettle Moraine North were mentioned as very desirable and well-suited locations for equestrian camping and riding.

#### **Suggestions and Solutions Offered by Respondents**

A number of respondents suggested that dual use, either shared use of the campground or seasonal differentiation of use by equestrian and group campers, would be an acceptable way to increase occupancy. Other suggestions and solutions offered:

- Improve and extend trails and improve trail marking
- Upgrade campground amenities to include electricity and showers
- Provide winter riding opportunities
- Promote equestrian use more, e.g. in the Twin Cities area
- Place the equestrian campground on the statewide reservation system
- Work with volunteers and horse clubs to maintain trails, promote facilities and raise funds

#### **Support for the proposed amendment**

Those in support of the proposal referenced utilizing state tax dollars for recreation that receives high use and cutting costs in tight fiscal times.

#### **Department Response**

The comments on the proposed amendment are greatly appreciated and notably higher than originally anticipated given the current levels of use. Comments provided reasonable and well thought out rationale for some of the recent trends, the current conditions, as well as options that could be considered to maintain equestrian use in some form.

After careful consideration of the comments and further evaluation of impacts and options, additional information is included in this response as the basis for the rationale of the recommendation.

#### **Past use and potential future use of an outdoor group camp**

A primary driver for the proposed amendment is past use levels, which are very low. Commenters suggested that the decline in the past two years was primarily due to extreme weather and the economy. While the last two years did show a significant and dramatic decline in use, the campground has never been close to full capacity since 2005 when attendance figures started being recorded. The investment to maintain the facilities is high compared to the revenue generated through campsite reservations, even at minimal maintenance levels.

**BRSF Equestrian Campground Annual Usage and Revenue**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Campsite nights<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Percent Capacity<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Campground Revenue<sup>3</sup></b>
2005	141	6%	\$1,692
2006	128	5%	\$1,536
2007	126	5%	\$1,512
2008	90	4%	\$1,080

2009	116	5%	\$1,392
2010	94	4%	\$1,128
2011	34	1%	\$408
2012	40	2%	\$480

<sup>1</sup>One campsite night equals one campsite rented one night.

<sup>2</sup>Assuming an April 15 to October 30 season and 12 campsites/night for 200 nights = 2400 campsite nights annually at full capacity.

<sup>3</sup>Campground revenue = campsite nights x \$12

The cost to maintain facilities is relatively high compared with use levels and associated revenue. Current management of the equestrian camp and trails is estimated to cost approximately \$6,000 per year. It was suggested in the comments that the development of additional amenities such as showers and electricity at the campground would potentially increase the number of users. These additional amenities were considered during the master planning process and it was determined that the costs of installation and maintenance were too great for the equestrian campground given its current use levels and the supply of other equestrian trail systems and associated amenities. Development costs for shower and water can reach \$400,000 to \$500,000.

In contrast to the low use of the equestrian campground, the demand for outdoor group camping opportunities is increasing on the property. A portion of the BRSF Pigeon Creek Campground is currently being used as a de facto group camp. Groups are reserving multiple adjacent sites to meet their needs for group camping. The Pigeon Creek Campground was not intended or designed for this use and this has the potential for conflict between group and individual campers. In addition, the existing indoor group campground is fully utilized and it is attracting some people who want a set-up more conducive to larger camping units that cannot be met at the indoor group camp site and displacing users wanting those features. Due to the popularity of the indoor group camp and the Pigeon Creek Campground, it is projected that significant use will occur if a new outdoor group camp was offered.

An analysis was conducted after the close of the public comment period, exploring options for other locations for an outdoor group campground. Locations were identified but the costs of building the infrastructure was high and locations near existing amenities and recreation features were limited.

In addition, consideration was given to a variety of scenarios that would provide shared use of the existing campground, including splitting the campground in two distinct use areas, separating use by season, for example equestrian camping in the spring and fall when riding is most active, and non-equestrian group camping during the summer months. Splitting the campground into two areas could lead to conflict issues between user groups. Groups are often noisier than individuals and could pose a disturbance for individual horse campers. Splitting the campground by season would be difficult to manage in terms of communicating to the public and could result in groups or equestrian campers showing up out of season without a site available. In addition, use of the equestrian campground has been slow throughout the season, so even limiting horse use to the fall and spring is likely to result in low use and poses a loss of revenue.

#### **Investing in the best and widely used trail systems with desirable amenities**

There are a wide variety of high quality equestrian resources for both camping and trail riding within the

vicinity of BRSF. Both the Department and Counties are investing in nearby locations that provide a higher quality riding experience. Channeling local use to facilities with a history of high utilization is an efficient use of resources while maintain a high quality rider experience. There are limitations on the growth and improvement of trails at the BRSF while other locations provide greater opportunities for growth. A notable area is Wildcat Mountain State Park that includes over 19 miles of trails and new improvements in the equestrian campground. Commenters did acknowledge the desirability of other equestrian facilities over BRSF.

While removing the horse trail designation will reduce the number of miles of trails available for riders within the BRSF, users can continue to ride on all existing forest roads throughout the property. In addition, the equestrian trail system in the BRSF is not part of a larger equestrian trail network so removing the horse trail designation will not result in result in a loss of connection with a wider network.

**Options to improve and make the existing equestrian trails more appealing**

Many commenters noted the trails were less than desirable and suggested that improvements should be made. The Department is limited in the changes and improvements that can be made to the existing equestrian trails on the property. During the master planning process, alternative trail options were explored, however, due to the hydrology of the site including a lot of wetlands, it was difficult to find additional trail locations through the forest that were dry enough for riding in addition to relocating trails along roadsides. Due to the lack of ability to improve the quality of the existing trails, upgrading the trails is not an option. Therefore, the quality of riding at this location will remain the same as the current situation.

**Use of volunteers to defray maintenance costs**

There were several suggestions to use volunteers to clear the trails and help with maintenance. While this offer is much appreciated, there are safety concerns with allowing volunteer groups in with equipment to clear downed trees or mow the trails. In addition, there is not an established local equestrian group to facilitate this type of activity.

# Master Plan Amendment Proposal

**Property Name:** Black River State Forest

**Date Current Master Plan was Approved:** January 2010

## Proposed Change to the Master Plan

The proposed amendment to the master plan would convert an equestrian campground and associated equestrian trails, into an outdoor group camp available on the reservation system.

**Attachment A** contains the specific master plan amendment language describing the proposed change.

**Attachment B** is a map showing the current location of the equestrian campground and horse trails.

**Attachment C** lists the equestrian camps and horse trails in the vicinity of Black River State Forest and includes a map of those facilities.

**Attachment D** contains photographs of the equestrian campground and horse trails at Black River State Forest.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

### Purpose and Need for the Proposed Plan Amendment

The Black River State Forest currently provides 17 miles of designated horse riding trails along with a 12 unit rustic equestrian campground (Attachment B). The equestrian campground, constructed shortly after the approval of the 1983 master plan has had low use for several years likely due to a combination of factors including recent improvements to other more developed horse campgrounds in the surrounding area (Attachment C), a large biting insect population and undesirable trail connectors along stretches of road rather than fully forested horse trails. These roadside trails are necessary in order to avoid a number of wetlands in the area.

Attendance figures have been recorded for the equestrian campground since 2005 and show a significant declining trend. The majority of the use is in the spring and fall with very few campers from June through August. The past two years (2011 and 2012) were particularly low.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Campsite nights*</u>
2005	141
2006	128
2007	126
2008	90
2009	116
2010	94
2011	34
2012	40

\* One campsite night equals one campsite rented one night

While demand is low for the equestrian camping and horse trails at Black River State Forest, there is a high demand by the public for group camping options. The state forest offers an indoor group camp that is heavily used including every weekend year round and almost every weekday in the summer. There is also interest in using the current indoor group camp for RV's and trailers which the site cannot accommodate. Currently 31 group camps that can be reserved are present in the Wisconsin State Park and Forest System. These sites tend to be very popular and in use most weekends. The proposed change to the equestrian campground to a group camp would likely significantly increase visitation and revenue.

The horse camp amenities already include a new vault toilet building constructed in 2009, a well, firewood bin, 12 camp sites with hitching posts, parking for day riders, and a large fire pit area where groups can gather, so it would be a low cost to convert to a group campground. Current management of the horse camp and trail includes 12-15 campground mowings per year, two trail mowings, vault toilet cleanings, maintenance, and pumping, twice annual trail and camp inspections, sign maintenance, trail brushing, and miscellaneous repairs to associated facilities. This is estimated to cost \$6,000 per year. The closure of the horse trails would reduce management costs to half of its current price. Staff time and maintenance dollars could then be redirected to other high priority uses on the property.

The campground conversion would be implemented for the 2013 season and would be available on the reservation system mid-April through December 1.

**Anticipated Primary Benefits of the Proposed Amendment:**

Anticipated benefits include the development of a new niche for the Black River State Forest. While there are multiple equestrian camping opportunities in the surrounding area, there are no other rustic group camping opportunities available. This new niche is likely to significantly increase visitation and revenue to the state forest.

**Additional Anticipated Benefits of the Amendment:**

- Increased revenue due to increased visitation
- Decreased maintenance costs due to closure of horse trails
- Redirection of staff time and maintenance costs to higher priority needs

**How the proposed plan amendment is consistent with or relates to the master plan's vision and goals:**

The proposed plan amendment is consistent with the master plan's goal to *"provide a range of quality outdoor recreational activities and settings, both motorized and non-motorized, ranging from primitive to developed, consistent with resource capabilities."*

**Compatibility with Statutes, Codes and Department Policies:**

The proposed development is compatible with Statutes, Codes and Department policies. The proposed plan change needs to comply with NR 44 master plan amendment procedures. This is a Type III Action under NR 150.

**Federal Aid Limitations:**

There are no Federal Aid limitations involved with the proposed plan amendment.

**Unavoidable Adverse Impacts:**

No significant adverse impacts are expected from the proposed changes. There will be a minimal impact on equestrian users.

### **Summary of Alternatives Considered:**

#### **Alternative #1: Preferred Alternative Outlined Above**

**Alternative #2:** Convert site to group camp but retain horse trails and allow group camp to be usable by groups with and without horses. This would allow horse riders to continue to use the site for camping. However, it would require the elimination of the day use parking area for horses. This would still require the property to maintain 17 miles of horse trails for a clientele with a long history of low use. It would also mix two user groups that may not be compatible. For example a non-horse rider group following a horse riding group experience could be adversely affected by the presence of horse manure.

This proposal would likely increase visitation. Management costs would not change under this scenario.

**Alternative #3:** Close campground and all horse trails. This would eliminate all management costs associated with the area. This would also require us to abandon the well and the newly constructed bathroom building.

**Alternative #4:** Add additional amenities such as electrical sites, reservation system, etc. to the campground that may make it more desirable to users. This alternative may increase use slightly, and would incur additional development and management costs, that may or may not be recouped. This likely would have limited impact on usage though as it does not impact the issues of high bug populations on the trails and the use of roads as trail connectors within the property.

**Alternative #5:** Keep campground and trails as they are. This would not address the issue of low visitor use. Management costs would remain the same.

#### **The Public Review Process:**

A 30-day comment period from November 1st – 30th will be open for the public to comment on a preferred alternative and/or provide alternative solutions.

In addition, the following outreach mechanisms will be utilized:

- News release concurrent with the beginning of comment period to the same media sources used during master planning.
- Email from superintendent to partners who currently receive the property's annual work plan.
- Update on current conditions page – over 2,225 subscribers will receive notification
- Notice on property's webpage
- Personal contact made by Superintendent to Wisconsin Horse Council – this would be made just prior to the news release.

#### **Description of the Support and/or Opposition to the Proposed Plan Amendment (including reasons for the various positions taken) and Any Unresolved Issues or Concerns:**

**Attachment A:** This language will be removed from or inserted into the approved January 2010 Black River State Forest Master Plan.

**Page 92:** Table 2.24: Rename “*Equestrian Campground*” to “*Rustic Outdoor Group Camp*”.

**Page 94:** Remove 7<sup>th</sup> bullet under “Area Specific Recreation Management Prescriptions” regarding the Equestrian Campground

**Page 106:**

Change 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> bullets under “Recreation Management Objectives” to:

- *Provide modern, rustic, primitive, and group camping opportunities.*
- *Provide a system for aesthetically pleasing, sustainable trails for hiking, cross-country skiing, and mountain biking that offer opportunities for quiet enjoyment of the forest.*

Revise first paragraph under “Camping” as follows:

*The Black River State Forest provides a variety of camping facilities from rustic to modern. Amenities include three family campgrounds, two group camps, two canoe campsites, and backpacking by permit.*

Table 2.26: Revise the “Horse Camp” entry to read:

Name	Camping Type	Acres	Current		Planned	
			# of sites with electricity	Total # of sites	# of sites with electricity	Total # of sites
Rustic Outdoor Group Camp	Rustic	15	0	12	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 wheeled units</li> <li>• 50 people max in tent area</li> </ul>

**Page 107:**

Remove “Equestrian Campground” section

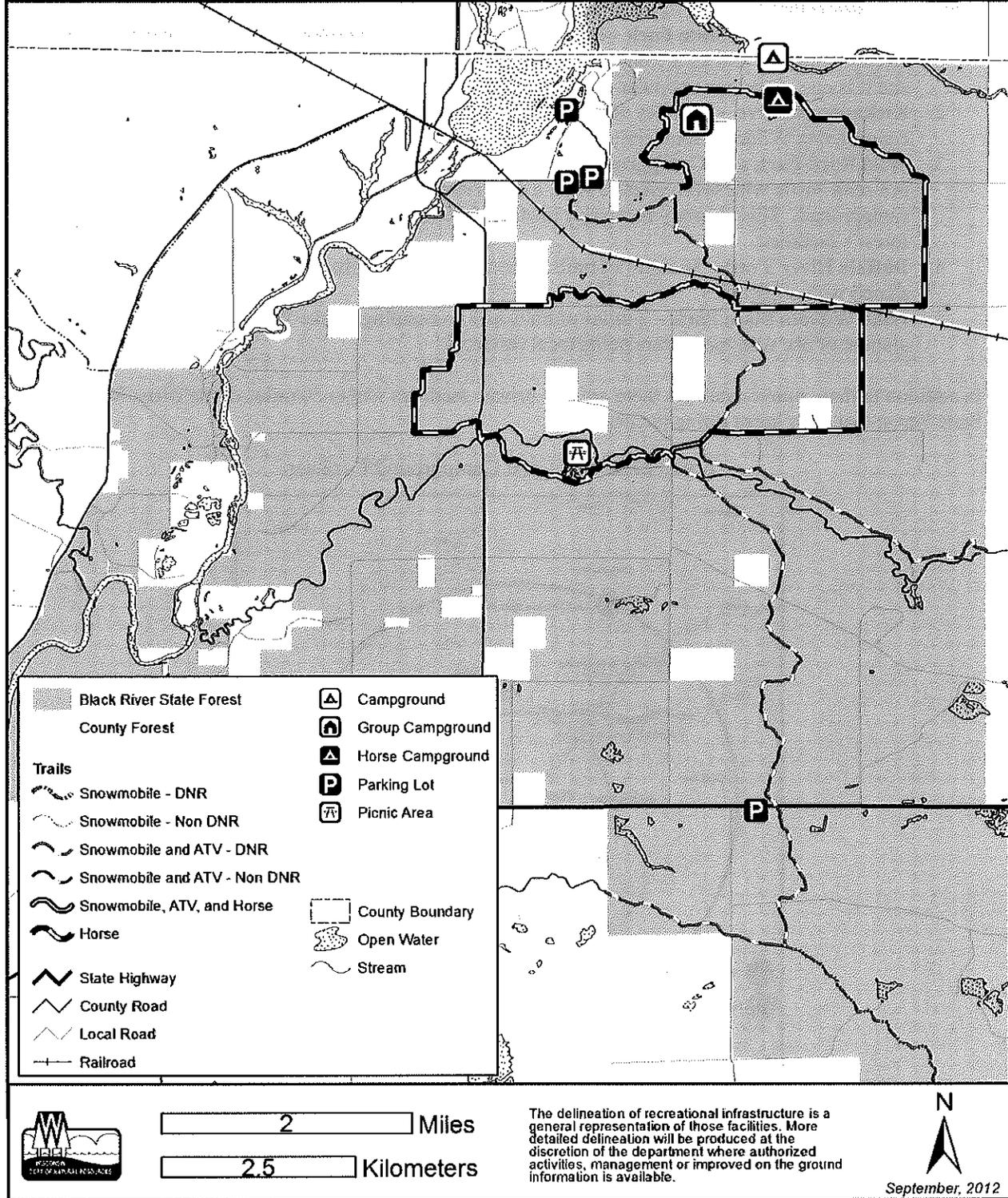
Change Section Heading from “Group Camp” to “Group Camps” (page 107) and add text as follows:

*A second rustic group camp will replace the former Equestrian Campground at the north end of the forest. This location will have 6-8 gravel spurs for parking a maximum of eight wheeled camping units and an additional area for tents to accommodate a maximum of 50 people. Each site has a picnic table, fire ring, and a large group fire ring is also available. The campground has vault toilets and a seasonally powered solar pump for water. Electricity is not available. The campground is not plowed during the winter months.*

**Page 109:** Table 2.28: Remove all “Equestrian Trails”

**Page 110:** Remove “Equestrian Trails” section

# Black River State Forest



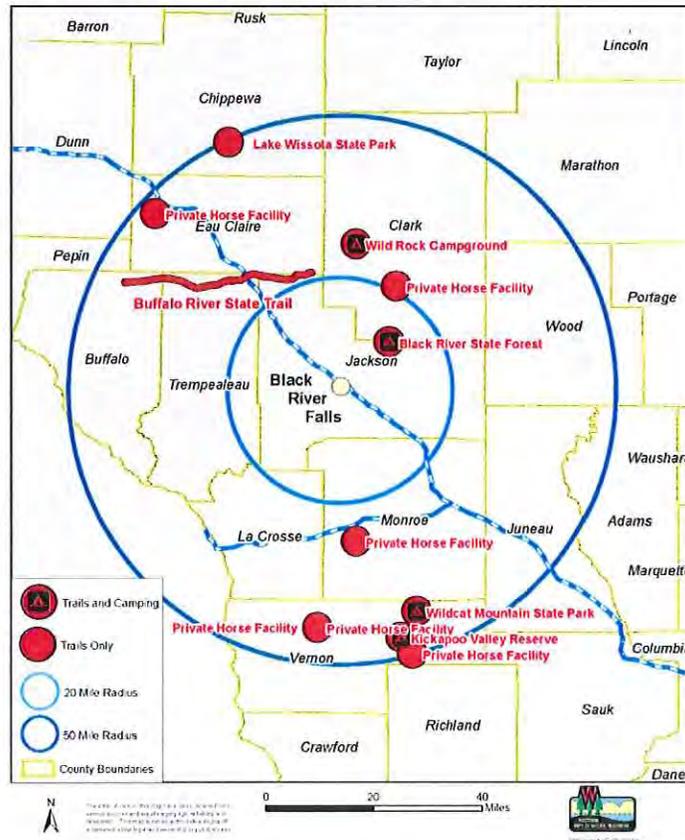
### Attachment C: Equestrian Campgrounds and Horse Trails in the Vicinity of Black River State Forest

There are several other horse riding and camping options in the region. There are at least five other public properties within 50 miles of the Black River Area:

1. **Wildcat Mountain State Park** - 15 miles of trails, and 24 campsites. Half of the campsites have electric hook-ups and all are on the reservation system. The campground is full most weekends and it is one of the most popular destinations in the state for horse riders.
2. **Kickapoo Reserve** – 37 miles of trails, and 25 campsites all rustic. The Reserve’s trails are connected to Wildcat Mountain’s system. Also a very popular destination for horse riders.
3. **Wild Rock Park and Campground, Clark County** – 41 miles of trails and 35 campsites. This is a semi-rustic with seven electric sites, a dump station; sites cannot be reserved, rustic campground. This property receives a medium level of use but considerably higher than the state forest’s facilities.
4. **Buffalo River Trail** – 36 miles of trails. The trail receives light horse usage as it is linear and shared with other users.
5. **Lake Wissota State Park** – 7 miles of trails and no camping. Lake Wissota’s trails receive a fair amount of use with most users being local residents.

In addition to these public facilities there are five private facilities within 50 miles of the Black River State Forest that offer horse riding recreation.

Area Horse Trails and Campground Facilities



**Attachment D: Photographs of current Equestrian Campground and Horse Trails at Black River State Forest**



Equestrian Campground Overview



Equestrian Campground Overview



Equestrian Campground Bathrooms



Equestrian Campground Group Fire Ring



Equestrian Campground Site



Equestrian Campground Water Station



Firewood Station



Horse Trails Signage



Horse Trails



Horse Trails