

North Country National Scenic Trail
North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio,
Pennsylvania, New York
Draft Michigan-Wisconsin Trail Corridor Plan
And Environmental Assessment



Wren Falls, Wisconsin

North Country National Scenic Trail

**TRAIL CORRIDOR PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FOR THE MICHIGAN AND WISCONSIN BORDER,
GOGEBIC COUNTY, MICHIGAN , IRON AND ASHLAND COUNTIES
WISCONSIN**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	1
Background on the North Country National Scenic trail	1
Chapter 2	3
Purpose and Need	3
Chapter 3	4
Issues and Concerns	4
Chapter 4	4
Description of Alternatives	4
Chapter 5	9
Affected Environment	9
Chapter 6	12
Analysis of Impacts	12
Chapter 8	20
Public Involvement, consultation, Coordination	20
Glossary	21

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) was established by Congress in 1980 to be a continuous hiking trail for non-motorized use across the northern United States. It is generally a natural surfaced foot path 24 inches wide. When completed the trail will be approximately 4600 miles long from New York to North Dakota.

This plan describes and analyzes two alternative three mile wide corridors within which the trail could be located from the area near Copper Peak Ski Area in Gogebic County, Michigan westward through Iron County, Wisconsin to Copper Falls State Park in Ashland County, Wisconsin. Other facilities such as parking and camping areas might be established within this corridor over time. Development of the route for the trail and associated facilities within the corridor depends on factors such as whether permission can be obtained from private landowners, funds are available to purchase easements, or agreement to secure the trail route is established within public lands.

In order to facilitate this planning process, the National Park Service (NPS) assembled a planning team comprised of state and local land managers and volunteers of the North Country Trail Association, who worked with the National Park Service to identify the most feasible corridor which also provided the most rewarding experience.

The northern alternative described in this plan (Alternative 2) identifies a corridor 3 miles wide which maximizes the use of public lands and large private land holdings to minimize the need to cross numerous small parcels, and balances the opportunities to enjoy the scenery and landscape in the area.

The no action alternative (Alternative 1) would be the corridor originally envisioned in the 1982 Comprehensive Management Plan for the trail. This is called the no action alternative in that it is the existing mapped route for the trail, although very little of it has been built on the ground. It will require securing agreement from numerous landowners.

The plan also includes an environmental assessment for constructing the trail, and compares the alternatives and potential impacts between them.

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Michigan-Wisconsin Corridor Plan**

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND ON THE NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

The North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) is one of only eleven National Scenic Trails—long distance, non-motorized trails that follow major geographic features or pass through scenic areas. It is similar in concept to the Appalachian NST but is also uniquely different because of the landscape through which it passes. The Appalachian NST traverses a mountain range through 14 states whereas the NCNST showcases natural, scenic and cultural features of seven northern states, but does not follow any specific geographical feature. When completed, the trail will extend over 4,600 miles from Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota to Crown Point, New York, on Lake Champlain along the eastern border of New York. See map 1 for an overview of the trail and the location of the planning area.

The NCNST is being built as a continuous footpath through diverse landscapes in order to:

- Establish a trail within scenic and historic areas of the north central United States to provide increased outdoor recreation opportunities and promote preservation of these landscapes and improve access to foot travel within them;
- Provide a premier hiking trail and experiences that depend on preserving the landscape in which the trail is established;
- Encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance, and management of the trail, wherever appropriate.

The National Park Service (NPS) is responsible for the overall administration of the NCNST. In 1982, the NPS completed a Comprehensive Management Plan for the trail. This plan provides overall guidance for development and management of the trail which is intended to be a partnership venture accomplished through the efforts of many cooperating Federal, State, and local agencies, private trail organizations, and interested individuals.

The North Country Trail Association (NCTA) is the primary, non-profit partner of the NPS in developing the trail into one of the premier hiking trails in the United States. The Mission of the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) is to:

Develop, maintain, preserve and promote the North Country National Scenic Trail through a national network of volunteers in 30 chapters, partner organizations and government agencies. The Association achieves its mission by creating, encouraging and supporting programs of public education, membership services, recreational opportunities and resource and corridor protection in keeping with its Vision for the Trail.

MAP 1 PLANNING AREA LOCATION



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CHAPTER 2

PURPOSE AND NEED

Purpose of the Corridor Plan

The purpose of the plan is to assess relevant factors and propose a corridor within which the North Country Trail can be developed through the planning area. Within this corridor, NCTA volunteers, state and local governments and community groups will work together to develop the trail on the ground to meet the intent of the National Trails System Act. The result will be a high quality continuous hiking experience throughout the planning area.

The National Trails System Act of 1968 and subsequent amendments created a general route for the NCNST, authorized the NPS to administer it, and provided authority to acquire land or land interests from willing sellers to provide a route for it.

The purpose of the Corridor Planning Process is to identify and evaluate potential corridors where an overland route for the North Country NST could be established in the Michigan-Wisconsin Border area. A desirable location for the trail would meet the following objectives.

- Provide for a diverse user experience by incorporating a variety of plant communities, terrain, open and enclosed spaces (ex. Forests, savannas, prairies).
- Provide vistas to broader landscapes for scenic and interpretive purposes.
- Link and protect significant geologic, biologic, and archeological sites
- Connect or provide linkages to communities for user support purposes.
- Where possible, use publicly-owned land for trail development and support facilities.
- The potential corridors must also connect the existing endpoints of the trail at Copper Peak Ski Jumping area in Michigan and Copper Falls State Park in Wisconsin.

This general route identified during the planning process was then compared with the 1982 Comprehensive Plan For Management and Use of the North Country National Scenic Trail (Comprehensive Plan). The Comprehensive Plan states that the North Country NST “should be a continuous overland (off-road) trail.

Need for this Corridor Plan

The 1982 Comprehensive Plan identified a corridor through the planning area (“No Action Alternative” in this plan) as high potential from Copper Peak Ski jumping area through the communities of Ironwood, Michigan and Hurley Wisconsin where it met with the Uller Ski Trail which was recommended for immediate certification. From the end of the Uller ski trail the comprehensive plan identified a corridor extending to Copper Falls State Park as the general route of the trail.

Since the 1982 Comprehensive Plan was written, changes in land ownership, use and management have made the original route of the trail less feasible to develop. In general, private residential development on small tracts has made it a daunting task to locate a continuous hiking trail on the ground, to reach Copper Falls State Park

There is a dedicated and enthusiastic group of volunteers who are focused on planning and building segments of the North Country NST that could be established on public or private lands within the

proposed corridor as well as maintaining existing sections of the trail. To complete the trail in this area, this plan is needed to provide guidance on where future segments should be established, given the changes in the planning area in the past 30 years. This plan will also help volunteers and other partners focus their efforts.

CHAPTER 3

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

During the internal and external scoping for this planning process, a few issues and concerns were identified by the general public, local, and state units of government. These are summarized below:

1. The North Country Trail route should make use of as much existing public land and trail as possible to minimize the amount of private land needed;
2. The trail should be located within the Potato River Valley in Wisconsin to take advantage of the scenery there;
3. The trail should have some connection to Ironwood, Michigan to benefit the community;
4. Subdivision of larger tracts of private land over time has made locating a corridor for the trail more complex. (The Existing Corridor described in the No Action Alternative contains approximately 700 parcels of private land);
5. The potential extensive use of private lands means that the trail route must fit with their activities and land use objectives.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES

Two alternative corridors are presented and analyzed: the No Action Alternative (also known as Alternative 1) and the northern alternative (Alternative 2). Several other alternatives were considered by the planning team, but dropped because they showed no advantages over the northern alternative. Map 2 shows the two alternatives.

The design of the proposed North Country NST corridor is based on a number of factors, but the primary two are:

- 1) Making use of large tracts of public land which are managed in a way that's compatible with the North Country Trail;
- 2) Using one of the existing bridges across the Montreal River, which bisects the planning area from north to south. The river is deeply incised, and building a trail bridge would be excessively costly.

Other factors in corridor design are:

- 3) Linkage to public lands for support facilities and interpretive opportunities,
- 4) Provision for a varied and scenic hiking experience,
- 5) Preservation of significant natural features;
- 6) A reasonable directness of route.

Alternative 1 No Action Alternative

Under the "No Action" alternative, the corridor referenced in the National Trails System Act and the 1982 Comprehensive Plan would continue to be the basis for locating the trail. For comparative

purposes, the width of this corridor is 3 miles, and it covers 21,400 acres. Below is the 1982 corridor description for the trail within the planning area:

Existing and potential routes continue through the Ottawa National Forest to Ironwood, MI and the Wisconsin State line. As the NCT crosses into Wisconsin, it follows a high potential route and a portion of the Uller Trail developed by the Iron County Young Adult Conservation Corps and maintained by the Penokee Rangers, a private trail organization. A general route continues to Copper Falls State Park where the NCT would follow existing trails in the park.

The corridor outlined above was given further definition by the planning team to make use of the features originally envisioned in the Comprehensive plan. However within this corridor, there are approximately 400 tracts of private land, with most less than five acres in size.

The No Action corridor, would head south from the Copper Peak ski area, onto a mixture of land owned by private entities, the State of Michigan, Gogebic County, Iron County the Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources. The corridor passes by the Gogebic-Iron County Airport, and roughly follows Black River Road due south towards the City of Ironwood (2010 census population 5,387) crossing Spring Creek north of the City of Hurley WI (2010 census population 1,547). All of this land consists of .1 to 5 acre tracts of privately owned land. West of Hurley, the trail would probably cross the Montreal River at the US Highway 2 bridge, entering Wisconsin, unless substantial funds could be obtained to build a pedestrian bridge.

From here the corridor straddles the Penokee Mt. Range, and the NCNST would use about 7 miles of the existing 11 mile long Uller ski trail, which runs from Pence to Weber Lake.

Alternative 2 Northern Corridor

Under this alternative, a Corridor of Opportunity approximately 3 miles wide and 54.4 miles long (approximately 48,493 acres) would connect the existing North Country Trail terminus at Black River Road, near the Copper Peak Ski Flying area, to the existing section of the North Country Trail Constructed on Iron County Land near Casey Sag Road. It would also include a connector trail to be developed if desired to the Ironwood/Hurley area. It should be noted that the actual ground disturbance and grading due to construction of trail tread would be roughly 13.5 acres of the 78,000 acre total, and the vegetation brushing and pruning to maintain the trail would be about twice that, 27 acres.

From the east, the corridor would most make use of private commercial forest lands, heading west across the Maple Creek Drainage, then southwesterly, crossing Jarvi Road, Triplett Lane, and Lake Road (MI Hwy 505) heading towards Point Mountain (Elevation 1258 ft. above mean sea level, AMSL) onto Gogebic County Forestry Land. Near Point Mountain, the branch in the corridor reflects the opportunity to create a spur trail to Little Girls Point County Park, approximately 4 miles north of the center of the main northern corridor. This park is owned by Gogebic County on the shore of Lake Superior (approximate elevation 602 AMSL) and has camping available in a highly desirable location. From Point Mountain the main corridor would continue West towards Bald Mt. (elev. 1317), and continues to the Montreal River and the Michigan State border, at Superior Falls on the Montreal River. The trail would most likely make use of the bridge on Lake Road, crossing into Wisconsin where the highway designation changes to N. State Highway 122. The corridor then would head north and the trail would most likely use the bridge on County Highway A, the access road into Saxon Harbor County Park, to make the crossing of Oronto Creek. The park is owned by the Iron County, WI Forestry and Parks Department, and provides 11 tent camping sites, bathrooms and showers. From the park heading south, the corridor would stay on Iron County Forest Lands as it runs along Oronto Creek, then to the west on Iron County parcels bordering the Bad River

Reservation. Heading south, the corridor would cross US highway 2, Old WI Highway 10, and State Highway 169, passing within a mile West of Gurney, WI (population 159 in 2010). Here, the corridor would join the Potato River Valley, near Potato River Falls, which would be one of the scenic highlights of the route. There are a series of three falls in this area, with a total drop of approximately 100 feet, and they are considered some of the most impressive in Wisconsin. The Iron County Forestry and Parks Department manages 5 primitive campsites (pit toilet, no drinking water) near the Falls, along with observation platforms, and trails. This site is accessed by heading west on Potato Falls Road from State Highway 169. The trail route itself would most likely be laid out on the right bank of the Potato River which flows SE to NW in this area. The corridor would take the trail up the Potato River drainage on Iron County forestry land heading east along the northern edge of Blueberry Marsh, then generally south following the Potato River to a point that is on the high ridge overlooking Upson Lake. It would then turn Southwest for about a mile, where it would join an existing, certified 3.4 mile long segment of the North Country Trail at Casey Sag Road about 4 miles north of Upson, WI. The route then follows this 3.4-mile certified segment to Wren Falls.

Near Wren Falls, a new bridge would be built to take the trail to the west side of the Tylers Fork River. The route would then angle Northwest and West utilizing additional Iron County Forest land until again approaching the Tylers Fork River. About ¼-mile south of the river the route would utilize permanent easements that have been secured from several different private parties. Another large bridge would be required to cross the river but the alignment following secured easements continues all the way to Copper Falls State Park.

Entering the park, the alignment angles generally west and then south across newly acquired park lands and eventually joins the existing, certified segment of the North Country NST. A connector trail to the Ironwood/Hurley Area is part of this alternative. This would allow hikers from the communities of Hurley/Ironwood area to access the main North Country Trail, and the Copper Peak Area via a multiuse recreation trail. Bicyclists would be able to ride from these towns, then work a hike on the NCT into their trip. This trail would be developed by those communities, most likely within the North portion of the corridor identified in the No Action Alternative, and may make use of existing road and utility rights of way. For the North Country Trail community, this trail would be a “white blazed trail”, as opposed to the blue blazes which mark certified North Country Trail segments. There is potential to make use of the corridor proposed in the No Action Alternative to complete a loop with the northern alternative, however there would be significant hurdles to secure a trail across large areas of private land ownership in small parcels.

Corridor from Casey Sag Road to Copper Falls State Park. From Casey Sag Road, both alternatives make use of the same corridor, DNR lands and existing constructed sections of the North Country NST to continue to Copper Falls State Park, Wisconsin via a constructed segment of the North Country Trail in Iron County—from Casey Sag Rd. to Wren Falls, a large waterfall on the Tyler Forks River. It is in Copper Falls State Park that the corridor enters Ashland County, WI.

Featured Common to Both Alternatives

Trailway. Both alternatives share the concept of the trailway, which is the width or area of land that is managed for the purposes of the North Country NST. It includes the trail itself, which is the actual tread and cleared area for the trail, as well as surrounding lands that are owned, leased, held by easement, or in some way controlled for management as part of the North Country NST. Trailway width could range from 10 ft to 1000 feet, depending on the opportunities available and the geography and land use of the site. In areas of private land ownership, most often the trailway is secured either by purchase, easement, or use agreement for the North Country NST. These secured rights may be held by a nonprofit partner or may be given to a state or local government

entity. Where the trail passes through existing public ownership or management areas, the trailway is the width or area of land that the managing agency has committed to management for the trail.

This document does not specifically locate the trailway, because that would be dependent to a great deal on what types of agreements can be negotiated with private landowners and government agencies along the corridor for on-the-ground alignment of the trail. Under “Alternatives Considered But Dismissed” several variations on the alternatives were evaluated but either dropped from consideration, or combined into the northern alternative. One alternative corridor that headed directly south from Saxon Harbor Recreation Area to Saxon, and on south to Casey Sag Road would have meant crossing at least 50 small parcels of private land, and bypassing a very scenic portion of the Potato River. Another proposal was to develop a side trail to Spirit Lake at the northeastern side of the study area-this alternative was included in the corridor for the northern alternative.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) and the National Park Service Director’s Order 12 require the NPS to identify the alternative that best promotes the goals of Section 101 of the National Environmental Protection Act. The environmentally preferred alternative is defined by the CEQ as: “...the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources” (CEQ 1981). In the case of selecting one of the two alternatives corridors, it is impossible to precisely compare impacts to the environment from the two corridors, because the actual route of the trail is not yet known. Alternative 1, the No Action Alternative, because it is passing through more developed areas and using more existing linear features, may result in less ground disturbance from new trail construction, if the trail is built to NPS standards. If a wider surfaced multi-use trail is desired by local governments close to developed areas, and this trailway is used by the NCT, the amount of vegetation removed and ground disturbance would be greater.

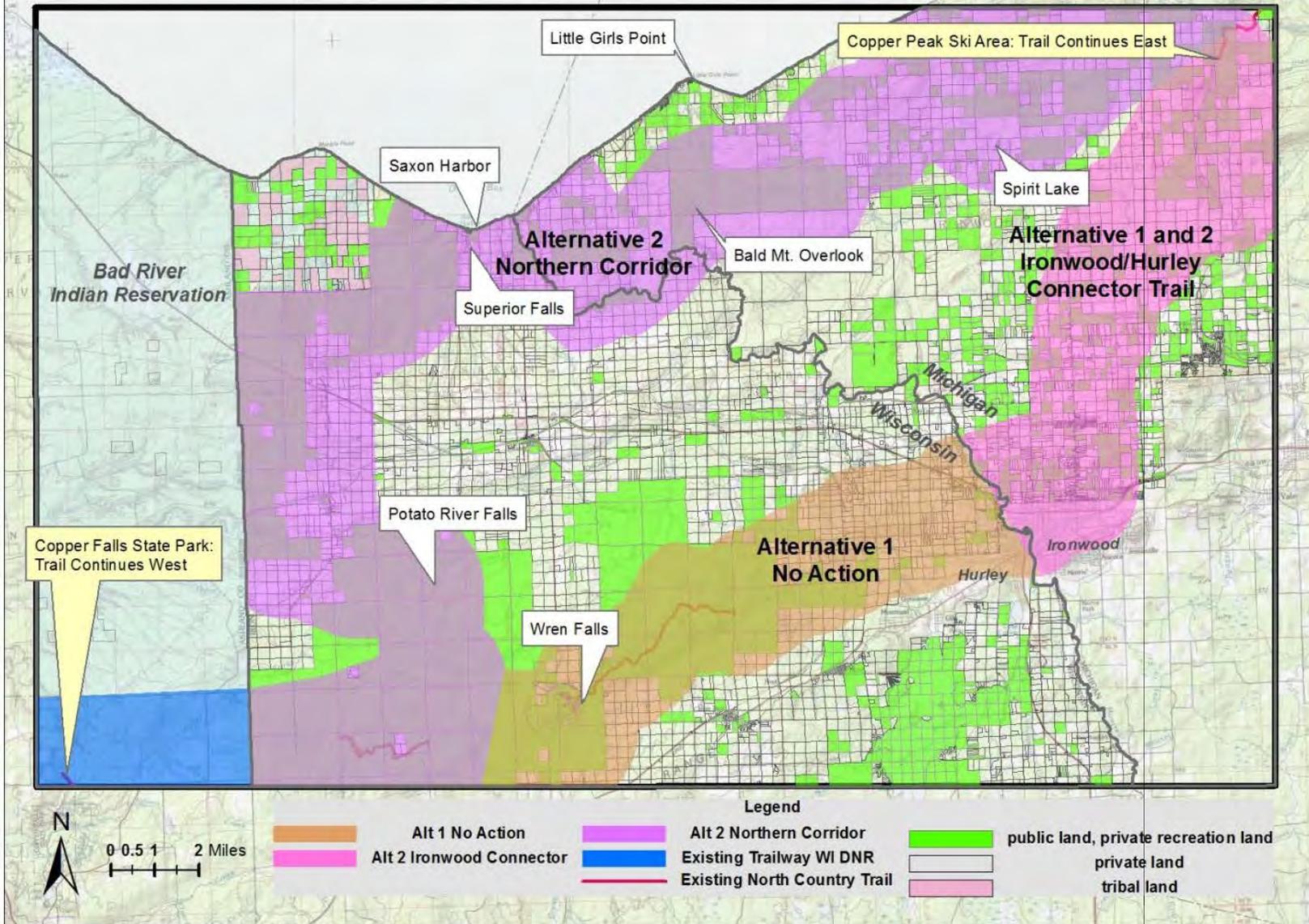
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Trail Corridor Alternatives - DRAFT Date: 8/1/2012
 Gogebic County, Michigan, Ashland and Iron Counties, Wisconsin

National Park Service
 U.S. Department of the Interior



Map 2 Corridor Alternatives



CHAPTER 5

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The Michigan-Wisconsin Border Area contains forest cover that consists of a diversity of uplands and lowlands and is considered a part of the Northern Highlands geographical province. It is known for its pitted outwash plains and kettle lakes mixed with extensive forests and large peat lands. Its landforms also contain some coarse-textured moraines. Soils are acidic and relatively unproductive due to low moisture-holding capacity and lack of organic matter. The Penokee- Gogebic Iron Range of Wisconsin and Michigan is about 80 miles long and half a mile to a mile wide running through the southern side of the planning area. The crest of the range rises 100 to 300 feet above the broad valley to the north.

In some places the range is broad and gently rounded, in others it is narrow, steep-sided and serrated. The lowest point in the study area is Lake Superior at 602 ft. above mean sea level, highest point in the study area is 1542 feet Above Sea Level.

Executive Order 11988-Floodplain Management governs potential impacts of Federal Project on flood plains. NPS regulations for implementing this order provide under Section 5, Part B Excepted Actions, 2a: "...foot trails are excepted from compliance with this order." This exemption is appropriate for the foot trail that would be constructed under the proposed action.

Prime and Unique Farmlands

Prime farmland as defined by the Soil Conservation Service is "farmland which meets a set of technical criteria based upon soil water capacity or availability of irrigation, temperature regime, pH, depth of water table, conductivity, sodium exchange, flood potential, erosion potentials, permeability and percentage of fragment rocks." According to NRCA soil survey data, there is less than 600 acres of soil within the northern alternative corridor suitable for designation as prime farmland, however this property is forested and owned by Gogebic County.

Air Quality

The Air Quality Index created by the US Environmental Protection Agency in 2009 shows that the air quality index for the study area is 31, which is classified as Good. The AQI aggregates data on 8 components of air pollution.

When a corridor for the North Country NST was first defined, aesthetic values such as the foreground scenery, distant views and natural and man-made landscape features were taken into consideration. Ideally the corridor would contain elements that create a visually diverse hiking experience, supporting the idea of the nationally designated Scenic Trail. Most of these elements are contained within the corridor, but some are located in viewsheds outside the corridors and can be seen from high vantage points within the corridor such as Bald Mt. During the planning process, geologic features, high points, and places of scenic beauty are identified and mapped. Conceptual trail routes are then designed to connect these various features.

Visual Resources

Walking along the North Country Trail through the rolling hills, scattered open spaces and woodlands of the planning area would provide a continually changing and delightful experience to the hiker. The juxtaposition of land uses such as opening created by timber harvests in various states of regrowth, and small agricultural tracts upon the corridor's topographic features offers variety as well as a pedestrian scale to the landscape.

Invasive Species

According to Executive Order 13112, on Invasive Species, an invasive species is “a species that is: 1. non-native (or alien) to the ecosystem under consideration and 2) whose introduction causes or is likely to cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health.” Species problematic for the planning area include glossy buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera X bella*), and most recently, garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*).

Wildlife and Fisheries

Wildlife is abundant in the study area. The mixture of woodlands, croplands, and wetlands provides excellent habitat, cover and food source for many species, both game and non-game. Wildlife inhabiting the Michigan-Wisconsin Border Route Planning Area include black bear, moose, white-tail deer, grey squirrel, fox squirrel, cottontail rabbit, coyote, fox, weasel, lowland furbearers, ruffed grouse, woodcock, pheasant, wild turkey, a variety of native and migratory song birds, raptors, and waterfowl, and numerous reptilian and amphibian species.

The waters of the study area contain a variety of cold and warm-water fish species. Warm-water species such as northern pike, bass, panfish and carp are found in the lakes, ponds and slow moving streams of the area. Winterkill is common with smaller, shallow lakes—like many of the kettle ponds. Cold water species such as brook trout, brown trout, and rainbow trout are generally found in the deep spring-fed lakes and faster flowing streams that have a temperature of less than 75° F.

Threatened, Endangered and Sensitive Species

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) lists Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), a species federally listed as threatened, as possibly occurring in Gogebic County, Michigan and Iron County, Wisconsin, and piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) in Iron County. The NPS initiated informal consultations by letter on June 21, 2012 with USFWS field offices in East Lansing, Michigan and Green Bay, Wisconsin on possible impacts of the project on . On July 18, 2012 the USFWS East Lansing office had concurred that the project would likely have no adverse affect on Lynx or their habitat. The Green Bay office has not responded as of the date of this draft

A review of the Wisconsin Heritage Inventory Database in February of 2012 lists the following sensitive species found within the northern alternative corridor:

Scientific Name (Common Name)
ANIMALS
Agabus leptapsis (A Predaceous Diving Beetle)
Brachycentrus lateralis (A Humpless Casemaker Caddisfly)
Glyptemys insculpta (Wood Turtle)
Haliaeetus leucocephalus (Bald Eagle)
Psilotreta indecisa (A Caddisfly)
PLANTS
Osmorhiza berteroi (Chilean Sweet Cicely)
Polystichum braunii (Braun's Holly-fern)
Streptopus amplexifolius (White Mandarin)
COMMUNITIES
Northern Mesic Forest

Species occurring historically in area

PLANTS

- Leucophysalis grandiflora (Large-flowered Ground-cherry)
- Listera convallarioides (Broad-leaved Twayblade)
- Polystichum braunii (Braun's Holly-fern)

In the Alternative 1, No Action corridor, the following species were identified in the Wisconsin Heritage Inventory Database review:

Scientific Name (Common Name)

ANIMALS

- Accipiter gentilis (Northern Goshawk)
- Cochlicopa morseana (Appalachian Pillar)
- Glyptemys insculpta (Wood Turtle)

PLANTS

- Asplenium trichomanes (Maidenhair Spleenwort)
- Dryopteris fragrans (Fragrant Fern)
- Goodyera oblongifolia (Giant Rattlesnake-plantain)
- Melica smithii (Smith's Melic Grass)
- Moehringia macrophylla (Large-leaved Sandwort)
- Polystichum braunii (Braun's Holly-fern)

COMMUNITIES

- Moist Cliff
- Northern Mesic Forest

OTHER ELEMENTS

- Bat Hibernaculum

Species occurring historically in area

PLANTS

- Botrychium mormo (Little Goblin Moonwort)
- Woodsia oregana ssp. cathcartiana (Oregon Woodsia)

Cultural Resources

A preliminary coarse database search for historic and prehistoric sites was completed for Iron County and Ashland Counties in Wisconsin by the Wisconsin DNR. This search provided results at a coarse resolution of 40 acres, and showed that approximately fourteen 40-acre parcels within the no action alternative 1 corridor ten 40-acre parcels within the northern alternative corridor contained prehistoric or historic sites that had been recorded in past surveys. It's important to note that these results do not cover the entire area of the alternatives and further analysis would be needed when on the ground routes are laid out.

In Michigan, the database and literature survey is in progress (8/1/2012)

The main industries in the planning area are natural resource based: timber harvesting and processing, recreation and tourism. Timber harvesting takes place on larger tracts owned by timber companies, on federal, state and county lands, and to a lesser extent on smaller privately owned tracts.

Primary land uses within the proposed North Country NST corridor are forestry and agriculture.

In Wisconsin, the North Country NST is a permitted use in all zoning classification (ss. 236.292 Wis.Stats.).

EXISTING LAND USE

Recreation and tourism is based on access to Lake Superior, fishing and hunting opportunities, the numerous federal, state and local parks, and campgrounds, and winter sports including snowmobiling, ice fishing, and downhill and cross country skiing and snowshoeing. The waterfalls and river canyons of the Black River, Potato River, and Montreal River are a big attraction in the summer months for tourists from the area, and the Midwest in general. Below is a list of recreation sites within or nearby the corridors:

Table 1 List of Recreation Opportunities within Alternative Corridors

Alternative	Facility Name	Managing Agency	Recreation Opportunities
1	Little Girls Point	Gogebic County	Beach on Lake Superior, walking paths, picnic area, group use pavilion
1	Mouth of the Montreal River	Gogebic County	Views of Lake Superior and Superior Falls; walking paths
1	Saxon Harbor	Iron County	Camping, boating, picnic area, beach on Lake Superior
1	Weber Lake	Iron County	Campground, picnic area, boating and fishing
1	Foster Falls on Potato River	Iron County	Primitive camping, picnicking, and views of the Falls
1	Potato Falls on Potato River	Iron County	Primitive camping, picnicking, and views of the Falls
2	Wren Falls on Tyler Fork River	Iron County	Primitive camping, picnicking, and views of the Falls
2	Uller Ski Trail	Iron County/Penokee Rangers	11 mile long ski trail from Pence to Weber Lake

CHAPTER 6 ANALYSIS OF IMPACTS

This chapter presents the probable impacts to the natural, cultural, and socio-economic resources of both alternatives. Evaluation of the effects requires consideration of the intensity, duration, and cumulative nature of the effect, as well as a description of any measures to mitigate for adverse impacts. A summary of environmental effects is discussed below. Effects are described as beneficial, negligible or adverse.

The North Country NST is by law a non-motorized trail. It is administered by the NPS and managed by a number of public and private partners as a trail suitable for foot travel only. The North Country NST Handbook for Trail Design, Construction and Maintenance guides its development. North Country NST construction standards call for a 24-inch tread, with an additional 1-foot vegetation clearance zone on either side. Ground disturbance would be limited to the trail tread itself, which may have organic materials grubbed or scraped away, and the subsoil graded and compacted. In flat areas the trail tread would be lightly touched to prevent it from being below the surrounding ground, so that the tread has positive drainage. Vegetation clearing for the trail may consist of brush cutting using a walk behind machine, pruning limbs and removing small trees in the trail. Where there is forest canopy above the trail, it would be left to reduce regrowth back into the trail. Total surface impacts would be approximately ½ acre per mile of trail construction. Generally, trail construction and maintenance would take place using hand tools and volunteer labor.

By following the standards in the NCNST construction and maintenance guide, the physical impacts to the resources would be similar between the alternatives and only the location of the trail would change. Trail construction would have minor and temporary adverse impacts on natural resources located within the construction zone. These impacts would be limited to the period of actual trail construction, which generally occurs in work days or work weeks, where several hundred feet may be completed at a time. Trail use would be expected to have negligible and continuing impacts on the physical environment, primarily in the form of increase in foot traffic and periodic maintenance of the corridor. In the experience of the NPS so far, NCNST designation itself has not shown itself over the past 30 years to lead to overuse of trails to the point where impacts are unmanageable. Despite similarities between the No Action and Northern alternatives, several differences exist between them. These differences, discussed below, clearly indicate that the Northern alternative is preferable for its scenic and recreational value, efficient use of resources, and smaller need to negotiate use of private land to complete the trail.

Land Ownership

Alternative 2, the northern corridor alternative, provides access to more recreation and scenic sites, and undeveloped wild lands. The opportunity to develop the trail and hike along the Potato River in Iron County was seen as an especially valuable opportunity by the planning team, along with the chance to access the Lake Superior shoreline at several points, and camp near the Lake at Saxon Harbor. The inclusion of a connector trail corridor from Copper Peak ski area to Ironwood/Hurley addresses the issue of tying the trail to the community. Alternative 1 would take the hiker into more developed areas, within sight of heavily traveled roads and facilities such as the Gogebic County Airport and US highway 2. These features detract from the overall potential available in the corridor however long distance hikers would have more opportunities to take advantage of services in the more developed communities of Ironwood and Hurley.

The northern corridor alternative makes the maximum use of forest and recreation lands owned by local governments, especially Gogebic and Iron counties, and private lands are in several clusters among the large public land tracts along the corridor. Alternative 1 runs primarily through private lands and the corridor contains approximately 1392 parcels. See table 2 for a comparison of the alternatives by land ownership.

Table 2 Comparison of Alternatives by Land Ownership

Owner	Alt 1 No Action	Alt 2 Northern
Local government forestland	17261 acres	35042 acres
Private	24881 acres 407 private owners	29409 acres 262 private landowners

	1392 parcels over .25 acres	894 parcels over .25 acres
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Soils

Under both the Northern and No Action alternatives, impacts to soils may occur but can be mitigated to a negligible level. Soil type, slope, and drainage all influence the suitability of an area to withstand the potential impacts of trail construction and use. When the trail is laid out for construction, the alignment chosen would attempt to minimize the possibility of erosion of the soil surface. In addition, soils that are frequently wet create difficult hiking conditions and would be avoided.

The intensity of impacts to soils caused by trail construction would be limited to minor ground disturbance within the narrow tread corridor. With proper layout of the trail on the landscape, following contours and minimizing up and down grades, erosion control techniques, planking or bridges, and trail monitoring, potential impacts to soils from constructing and using the trail can be mitigated to a negligible level. As necessary, proper erosion control techniques such as sidehill construction and drainage dips would be employed. Soils that are particularly unsuitable—such as poorly drained areas—would be avoided to the greatest extent possible. If the trail must cross a wet area, puncheon walkways or bridges would minimize the negative impacts from the crossing. Monitoring of the trail by volunteer trail maintainers would identify any cumulative erosion problems so that appropriate erosion control actions can be taken. The NPS, in conjunction with the NCTA has developed a handbook on trail design, construction, and maintenance for the North Country NST. This handbook is used by all volunteer trail builders and should result in a sustainable hiking trail with minimal environmental impacts.

Water and Wetlands

Impacts on water resources are possible during construction, use, and maintenance of the trail. These impacts may include sedimentation, degradation to habitat, and stream bank destabilization.

Executive Order 11990, Protection of Wetlands, requires federal agencies to avoid, where possible, impacts to wetlands. The NPS would expect that the necessary permits would be obtained before trail construction through wetland environments begins on any portion of the North Country NST.

Trail construction in wetlands is subject to permitting under federal regulations administered by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency. Both Wisconsin and Michigan State Law also have provisions regulating the construction of trail in wetlands and stream crossings. These provisions would be followed in both the No Action and Northern alternatives.

Under both the No Action and Northern alternatives, impacts to water resources can be mitigated to a negligible level by using proper water crossing structures where water and wetlands cannot be avoided or where water features are included as part of the glacial heritage. Bridges would be constructed to span creeks and streams, and boardwalks or puncheons would be constructed through wetlands.

Under both alternative a number of water and wetland crossings would be required, however the number and nature of these features won't be known until the route is laid out on the ground. A planned corridor and professional involvement in siting the water crossing structures would help

minimize the number of these structures necessary and also minimize related negative impacts to water resources. Ongoing monitoring of existing segments of the North Country NST has ensured that there have not been significant impacts to water resources as a result of either trail construction or trail use.

When water structures are constructed, placement of fill materials or structures in wetlands would be subject to state and federal regulation. The rules in place that govern activities in both Wisconsin and Michigan wetlands would apply. Permits from the WDNR and the MDNR would be needed to construct bridges and approaches, or conduct development activities in wetlands. Additionally, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has jurisdiction over wetlands and waters of the United States under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Permits would be needed from the Corps of Engineers for bridges and boardwalks in wetlands.

Under the “No Action” alternative similar impacts may occur, but it is difficult to quantify impacts since new and existing trail may be relocated without a planned corridor. Furthermore, the uncoordinated development of the trail may lead to the construction of more water related structures (i.e., bridges, boardwalks, etc.) than may be necessary or efficient which would be an adverse effect.

Air Quality

Under both alternatives, impacts to air quality would be negligible. The small increased number of hikers in the area may slightly increase the level of motorized vehicle emissions as trail users travel to the trail. Conversely, overall emissions may be reduced as more people walk the trail rather than drive for pleasure. Under the Northern alternative, if land or trail easements were acquired for the trail, the increase in protected land would limit some development and therefore limit negative impacts to air quality. In either case, since the air quality of the planning area is good or current and anticipated use of the trail is light to moderate, the effect on air quality resulting from trail users’ vehicles are expected to be negligible.

Visual Resources

The Northern alternative would, over time, permanently protect some land within the trail corridor from development. The trailway would typically include an area greater than the width of the trail itself, providing a visual buffer from the surrounding landscape. A planned corridor for the trail would ensure that possible trail route options are evaluated to provide outstanding views and excellent hiking experiences.

Vegetative management plans could be implemented to further increase the scenic value of the trailway over time. This would positively affect not only the trail but also the surrounding land. Employing vegetative management plans might involve work to enhance existing plant communities or re-create former communities such as prairie restorations, which may beneficially impact biodiversity. Selective pruning or cutting may also be implemented to improve views of features inside or outside the immediate trailway.

Depending on its location, the trail offers numerous opportunities to preserve views, vistas, and other visually appealing topographical and vegetative features. Their incorporation into the trailway would expose visitors to scenic resources they do not normally encounter as they travel through the area which would be a beneficial impact.

Under the “No Action” alternative, the location of the trail would be more dependent on “handshake” agreements. This means that typically only the trail itself, or a very limited area surrounding the trail would be protected from development and, most likely, only on a temporary

basis. The natural area created by the trail may be limited in size and could eventually be lost due to relocation of the trail. Under this alternative, planning activities to determine the trail route would be minimal and significant views might therefore be left out of the trail route which would be an adverse impact.

Invasive Species

Invasive species are currently spreading into ecosystems within the corridor regardless of the trail. Under both the Northern and No Action alternatives it is possible that non-native plant species could be introduced within the trailway. Under the Northern alternative, planned and coordinated development and maintenance of the North Country NST would occur which would help control the advance of exotic vegetation into native ecosystems.

A wayside exhibit and boot brush, as shown below, has also been located at some entrances to North Country NST segments to inform hikers about the existence of invasive species, their effect on the native environment, appearance, and control measures. These interpretive materials include information about how the hiker can help to limit the spread of invasive species by staying on the trail and using the boot brushes.



Under the “No Action” alternative, development of the trail would be more opportunistic. It would probably not undergo the same evaluative process to help identify a route that would have the least potential to advance exotic species. This would exacerbate this growing problem.

Wildlife

In general, under both the No Action Alternative and the Northern alternative, securing a trailway would have no significant effects on the wildlife within the proposed corridor. Some wildlife may be disturbed during construction activities and when hikers are using the trail. This disturbance is short term, and the overall pattern of wildlife use of the area would not change. Most wildlife would become accustomed to the occasional presence of hikers. It has been the experience of the NCNST that users are concerned and aware of the surrounding environment and take great precautions to preserve the habitats that surround the trail.

With proper and effective trail design, erosion control during construction, proper placement of water crossings, etc., it is unlikely that there would be adverse effects to the fishery resources of the area near the North Country NST. Proper maintenance of the trail, especially in hilly areas near surface waters, would help prevent impacts to the fishery resources due to erosion and sedimentation. Under both the northern and the No Action alternatives, impacts to fisheries can be mitigated to a negligible level.

The implementation of either alternative would result in a maximum of 13.5 acres of disturbance due to tread construction and 27 acres of vegetative clearing over the course of 54 miles of trail construction. There is no way of knowing exactly what types or how much ground cover or habitat would be affected at this stage of trail development, and further analysis will be needed when trail is laid out on the ground. Relative to other human activities in the planning area such as logging, agriculture, and residential development, these impacts would not be significant for sensitive or listed species such as wood turtles, Canada lynx, or wolf. Another threat to sensitive species is direct human contact or disturbance. The most vulnerable species to direct human contact is the wood turtle, which might be encountered on the trail by hikers. Outreach measures such as interpretive signs would be employed to instruct trail users to not handle or otherwise turtles or other wildlife on the trail, and impacts to the species as a result of trail development would be insignificant.

Cultural Resources

In 2004 the NPS and Wisconsin State Historic Preservation officer signed a Programmatic Agreement that outlines how the National Park Service will carry out Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act regarding the long distance trail development in the State of Wisconsin.

The National Park Service or the Forest Service would automatically be required to comply with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act as amended for any new trail construction financed or approved by these agencies.

Any cultural resources identified through the section 106 process would be avoided in siting and building the trail, so there would be no significant impact to cultural resources.

Socioeconomics

Increased public use of the area may benefit local businesses. Although the trail may attract some new commercial establishments to the local communities, a significant increase in that type of development is not expected. As awareness and use of the North Country NST increases, some economic benefits to existing area businesses such as grocery stores and bed & breakfast inns, may result from spending by day hikers and overnight backpackers.

Under both alternatives, emergency services for hikers may be necessary. The appropriate local jurisdiction would be responsible for any law enforcement or emergency responses along the trail.

Prime and Unique Farmlands

According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), projects that irreversibly convert farmland to non-agricultural uses are considered subject to the Farmland Protection Policy Act. The NRCS does not consider development of the NCT as an irreversible conversion of farmland. Some land acquired for the trail may be leased back for agricultural purposes, preserving the existing land use.

Under the “No Action” alternative, this trend would continue with a subsequent loss of opportunities to build the trail. Completion of a permanent, continuous trailway would be unlikely under the “No Action” alternative.

Securing lands for the trail may change current land uses but does not preclude other future uses. By protecting lands for the trail under the northern alternative, development is restricted and resources are protected. The trailway may, however, be such an attractive and desirable resource

that, although unintentional, residential development around it may increase. The North Country NST is a permitted use in all zoning classifications in Wisconsin (§ 236.292 Wis. Stats).

Recreation

Creation of the NCT through the Michigan-Wisconsin Border Area would enhance public awareness of the area's scenic landscape. It would also connect the area with an outstanding, national recreational trail system. It would be used primarily for hiking as well as for bird watching, interpretive walks, and snowshoeing. This county-wide linkage of public lands would increase their utilization and benefit the recreation user. Statewide, as part of the 2005-2010 Wisconsin SCORP, researchers completed a survey of state and local recreation plan recommendations. From this survey, the North Country NST was found to be a desirable feature across the state.

The trail may impact the current recreational use, estimated at 10,000 recreation-days, primarily fishing and hunting, that are presently provided on DNR-owned lands within the proposed corridor. A positive impact is that the trail would provide better access to portions of these holdings for hikers as well as hunters and anglers and create a greater awareness of these public lands. In the 2005-2010 Wisconsin SCORP, "lack of access to public lands" was identified as a primary environmental barrier for increased physical activity and outdoor recreation. In the 2005-2010 SCORP, recreation compatibilities were assessed for a number of common recreation uses across the state. Through this work it was found that hikers view hunting as an activity antagonistic to their own. From the hunter's perspective, however, hiking has a neutral, supplementary interaction with hunting. These findings suggest that hiking and hunting—as well as other potential trail uses—can be compatible given proper planning and managed user interactions.

Because the trailway would pass through local recreation lands, these areas may receive additional visitors as a result of the trail. These facilities should not be greatly affected. Some secondary impacts may occur such as litter and trespassing. These impacts would be negligible because, by its nature, the North Country NST is designed and managed to provide for low-impact experiences.

The projected use of the trail is difficult to estimate. Based on patterns of use on other trails it is likely that use would be highest near populated areas or existing recreation areas. In some areas, conflicts between user groups could develop. These conflicts are also difficult to predict, because perceived conflict is directly related to volume of use. Trail volunteers and local law enforcement agencies would monitor the trail as necessary.

The physical and social carrying capacities of the trail are not known and to some degree may be dependent upon the width of the trailway actually acquired, volume of use, and other factors. However, use of the North Country NST in other areas has not resulted in deterioration of the resource or lessened user experience.

As the trail is developed and as it becomes more widely known, users and patterns of use can be studied and monitored. Actions would be taken as necessary to resolve user conflicts or other conflicts that may develop as a result of the trail's presence.

In the case of an injury to a trail user or a fire along the trail, an emergency response may be needed. In these situations, law enforcement and medical professionals from the nearest community would be responsible for proper emergency response. The risk of such an event occurring is minimal as is the risk of environmental damage from such a response.

Under the “No Action” alternative, trail development may not occur in a planned fashion to connect public lands which would be a lost opportunity and an adverse impact. Under the “No Action” alternative management responsibilities are the same as for the northern alternative. Potential impacts would therefore be the same.

Property Tax Base

It is difficult to determine the fiscal impacts to local units of government resulting from the development of the North Country NST. This is because there is no way to predict what private lands would be available for future acquisition or donation on a “willing seller-buyer basis.” However, the local tax base should not be significantly affected by this action, as it would not result in major changes in land use.

In the event that lands within the corridor are acquired by any public entity for the use of the trail on a willing seller-willing buyer basis, local units of government could experience a minor impact on tax revenues. On the Wisconsin side, a State Statute enacted on January 1, 1992, states that each time a new property is acquired, the purchase price is set as an equivalent of an assessment and aids-in-lieu-of-taxes are paid on that basis. One of the impacts of additional land acquisition for this project would therefore be an increase in these payments. Because the purchase price of these properties is often higher than the equalized assessed value of the property, the state’s payment is often greater than taxes currently paid. As additional properties are acquired for the project this increase in the tax base would continue.

If the Federal government purchased lands under the “willing seller” provision of the National Trail System Act, lands under the Federal Law U.S.C. 6901-6907, the Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) Act, would authorize payments to certain units of local government with eligible Federal lands within their jurisdictions. These payments would occur under prescribed payment formulas and within amounts annually appropriated by Congress. The laws that implement these payments recognize that the inability of local governments to collect property taxes on Federally-owned land can create a financial impact. PILT payments are made annually for tax-exempt Federal lands.

Under the “No Action” Alternative, development of the North Country NST would be opportunistic and would not identify costs associated with the development of the trail, support facilities for users, or land acquisition costs. Without a plan to optimize costs, fiscal resources would likely be used in an inefficient manner. These impacts would largely be avoided under the planned trail construction and land acquisition practices outlined in the northern alternative. The costs of developing the North Country NST under the northern alternative are discussed below.

The majority of the trail built in the Michigan-Wisconsin Border Area would be both a simple brushed trail through grasses and trees, and in areas with more topographic relief, a trail of native mineral soil benched into hill sides. Aside from the cost of tools, the labor would be provided by volunteers from the North Country Trail Association or other volunteers. There would be steep or wet areas that the trail would cross requiring sidehill construction or structures such as puncheons, turnpikes, or boardwalks. These areas are expected to be minimal and, since the exact location of the trail is unknown at this time, it is difficult to provide exact costs for these situations.

Depending on the trail’s location, a number of water crossing structures such as bridges or armored fords would be required in the Michigan-Wisconsin Border Area

Parking is presently available at several locations within the proposed corridor and, depending on trail location, can minimize the number of new parking lots that need to be constructed

Based on available road crossings and an approximate spacing of three to four miles between trailhead parking areas, an additional 3-4 parking areas would need to be developed. These would be designed for approximately 2-5 vehicles, with larger parking areas located on public lands that accommodate other recreational activities. A total estimated cost of \$28,000 is projected for constructing and improving parking areas. This is based on an average cost of \$10,000 for one large lot and \$6,000 for three smaller lots. Simple information kiosks would be placed at each parking area; three are presently in place and about six additional kiosks are expected to be needed. Based on an estimated cost of \$700 per unit, the total cost for the new kiosks is estimated at \$4,200.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts result from actions that, when viewed with other actions in the past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future regardless of who has undertaken or would undertake them, have an additive impact on the resource the proposal would affect.

- Direct Impacts resulting from trail construction might include Acquisition of land or easements for the trail within this corridor could result in additional protection of greenways and open spaces for protection within this corridor , open space over both the short and long term.
- Development of the North Country NST would provide the opportunity for families and individuals to recreate and exercise their way to health. Americans' physical activity has reached an all-time low. The National Center for Bicycling and Walking states that "Obesity, diabetes, heart disease, stress and a host of other ills are increasing. Physical inactivity and obesity rank second to smoking in their contribution to total mortality in the United States."
- The North Country Trail Association (NCTA) is the main non-profit partner of the National Park Service in developing and managing the NCNST. The NCTA works through local trail chapters, NPS, and other agencies to assure the continuity of the trail throughout 7 states crossed by the trail. Continued development of the trail would require a greater commitment by the NCTA and it's chapters to recruit more members to develop and maintain the trailway.
- Time is an important factor in the development of the trail. The continued implementation of the Corridor Planning Process would speed up consensus on where the trail is located, as well as its acquisition and development. Given the rising values of land within the corridor, shortening the time for completion of the North Country NST would ultimately decrease its cost.

After review of the impacts of the proposal, the NPS has determined that the selected alternative to construct the North Country NST through the Michigan-Wisconsin Border Area would not result in the impairment of any significant scenic resources, and would not violate the NPS Organic Act.

CHAPTER 7

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, CONSULTATION, COORDINATION

The NPS and planning team members made numerous informal contacts with the public, and state and local government, since the planning process began in 2007. A formal scoping meeting with state and local governments was held October 18, 2007 in Wakefield, MI and a public meeting was held on September 24, 2008 at Gogebic County Community College in Ironwood, MI.

GLOSSARY

Biodiversity: Biodiversity is the variety and variability among living organisms and the ecological system in which they occur on the local and regional landscape.

Corridor of Opportunity: A planned and mapped linear space, generally 1 mile to 4 miles wide, but wider in some places to protect exceptional features, within which the cooperating partners are working to establish the “Trail” and a suitable “Trailway”. Rarely would the partners seek to acquire or protect the entire width of the corridor for the trail. The reason the corridor is wider than the trailway that would be acquired is to provide the opportunity to be flexible in working with willing landowners on a voluntary basis. (see “Trailway”)

Endangered Species: A species on the Federal or State Endangered Species list whose continued existence as a viable component of the State’s wild animals or wild plants is determined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or state wildlife agencies to be in jeopardy on the basis of scientific evidence.

North Country Trail Association(NCTA) : The The North Country Trail Association develops, maintains, protects, and promotes the North Country National Scenic Trail as the premier hiking path across the northern tier of the United States through a trail-wide coalition of volunteers and partners.

National Park Service (NPS): The agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior responsible for preserving, protecting, and managing the natural, cultural, and recreational areas of the National Park System. The mission of the NPS includes two primary goals: to preserve our natural and cultural resources and to provide for public use and enjoyment of these resources in ways that will leave them unimpaired for future generations. The NPS is responsible at the Federal level for carrying out the provisions of the National Trails System Act as they relate to the North Country NST by coordinating, guiding, and assisting the efforts of others to acquire, develop, operate, protect, and maintain the trail.

Special Concern Species: Species about which a problem of abundance or distribution is suspected but not yet proven scientifically. This State classification focuses attention on species before they become threatened or endangered.

Stewardship Fund: A Wisconsin legislatively established fund administered by the WDNR, which provides funding for conservation and recreation programs, including matching grants to not-for-profit conservation organizations for certain projects. The North Country NST is one of the qualifying projects, and may receive grants for land acquisition.

Threatened or Endangered Species: A species on a Federal or State Threatened or Endangered Species list is one which appears likely, within the foreseeable future, on the basis of scientific evidence, to become endangered.

Trail: The usable tread and immediate surrounding space that is maintained for the purpose of passage along the trail route. For walking only segments, this may be a 24- to 30-inch wide tread and an additional 2 feet of cleared space on either side. For segments where other activities are

also allowed, these measurements would likely be greater. Also see Corridor of Opportunity and Trailway.

Trailway: The width or area of land that is managed for the purposes of the North Country NST. It includes the “Trail” and surrounding lands that are owned, leased, held by easement, or in some way controlled for management as part of the North Country NST. Generally its width ranges from 50-1000 feet. It most often is the land secured for the North Country NST. These secured rights may be held by the foundation or may have been given to the WDNR. Where the trail passes through existing public ownership or management areas, the “Trailway” is the width or area of land that the managing agency has committed to management for the trail. Also see Corridor of Opportunity and Trail.

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR): The state agency responsible for implementing State and Federal laws that protect and enhance Wisconsin’s natural resources—its air, land, water, wildlife, fish, and plants. It coordinates the many State-administered programs that protect the environment and provides a full range of outdoor recreational opportunities for Wisconsin residents and visitors.

DRAFT

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

North Country National Scenic Trail Wisconsin/Michigan Border Amendment To 1982 Comprehensive Management Plan

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to examine alternatives and potential environmental impacts of a proposal to amend to the 1982 Comprehensive Plan to the route for the North Country National Scenic Trail between the end of the existing developed trail at the Copper Peak Ski Area in Gogebic County, Michigan, and Copper Falls State Park in Ashland County, Wisconsin. The proposal is laid out in terms of a corridor plan 3-5 miles wide within which the trail could be built. The exact route on the ground for the trail within this corridor is not yet known, but finding the best location, negotiating with landowners and construction will take place over the next 10 years.

Purpose of this Decision

The purpose of this Finding and Decision is to approve an amendment to the 1982 Comprehensive Plan to the route for the North Country Trail between the end of the existing developed trail at the Copper Peak Ski Area in Gogebic County, Michigan, and Copper Falls State Park in Ashland County, Wisconsin. Within this corridor, NCTA volunteers, state and local governments and community groups will work together to develop the trail on the ground to meet the intent of the National Trails System Act. The result will be a high quality continuous hiking experience throughout the planning area.

The National Trails System Act of 1968 and subsequent amendments created a general route for the North Country Trail, authorized the National Park Service to administer it, and provided authority to acquire land or land interests from willing sellers to provide a route for it. The Comprehensive Plan states that the North Country Trail should

- Provide for a diverse user experience by incorporating a variety of plant communities, terrain, open and enclosed spaces (ex. Forests, savannas, prairies).
- Provide vistas to broader landscapes for scenic and interpretive purposes.
- Link and protect significant geologic, biologic, and archeological sites
- Connect or provide linkages to communities for user support purposes.
- Where possible, use publicly-owned land for trail development and support facilities.

Need for this Amendment

The 1982 Comprehensive Plan identified a corridor through the planning area (“No Action Alternative” in this plan) as high potential from Copper Peak Ski jumping area through the communities of Ironwood, Michigan and Hurley Wisconsin where it met with the Uller Ski Trail

which was recommended for immediate certification. From the end of the Uller ski trail the comprehensive plan identified a corridor extending to Copper Falls State Park as the general route of the trail.

Since the 1982 Comprehensive Plan was written, changes in land ownership and management have made the original route of the trail less feasible to develop. In general, private residential development on small tracts has made it a daunting task to complete this section of trail and provide a high quality trail experience. This plan is needed to show how the NPS, is amending the 1982 Comprehensive Plan to select a more feasible and scenic route for the North Country Trail that makes the best use of public lands.

There is a dedicated and enthusiastic group of volunteers who are focused on planning and building segments of the North Country Trail that could be established on public or private lands within the proposed corridor as well as maintaining existing sections of the trail. To complete the trail in this area, this plan is needed to provide guidance on where future segments should be established, given the changes in the planning area in the past 30 years. This plan will also help volunteers and other partners focus their efforts. This Finding of No Significant Impact and the Environmental Assessment constitute the record of environmental impact analysis and the decision-making process for the project.

Selection of the Preferred Alternative

The EA includes an analysis of two alternatives: the Northern Alternative (preferred) and the No Action Alternative. The Preferred Alternative is Alternative 2, also called the Northern Corridor. Under this alternative, a Corridor of Opportunity also approximately three miles wide and 54.4 miles long (approximately 75,722 acres) would connect the existing North Country Trail terminus at Black River Road, near the Copper Peak Ski Flying area, to the existing section of the North Country Trail Constructed on Iron County Land near Casey Sag Road (See Map 2). It would also include a connector trail to be developed if desired to the Ironwood/Hurley area. It should be noted that the actual ground disturbance and grading due to construction of trail tread would be roughly 13.5 acres of the 75,722 acre total, and the vegetation brushing and pruning to maintain the trail would be about twice that, 27 acres.

From the east, the corridor would most likely make use of private commercial forest lands, heading west across the Maple Creek Drainage, then southwesterly, crossing Jarvi Road, Triplett Lane, and Lake Road (MI Hwy 505) heading towards Point Mountain (Elevation 1258 ft. above mean sea level, AMSL) onto Gogebic County Forestry Land. Near Point Mountain, the corridor has the opportunity to create a spur trail to Little Girls Point County Park, approximately 4 miles north of the center of the main northern corridor. This park is owned by Gogebic County on the shore of Lake Superior (approximate elevation 602 AMSL) and has camping available in a highly desirable location. From Point Mountain the main corridor would continue West towards Bald Mt. (elev. 1317), and continue to the Montreal River and the Michigan State border, at Superior Falls on the Montreal River.

The trail would most likely make use of the bridge on Lake Road, crossing into Wisconsin where the highway designation changes to N. State Highway 122. The corridor then would head north and the trail would most likely use the bridge on County Highway A, the access road into Saxon Harbor County Park, to make the crossing of Oronto Creek. The park is owned by the Iron County, WI Forestry and Parks Department, and provides 11 tent camping sites, bathrooms and showers. From the park heading south, the corridor would stay on Iron County Forest Lands as it runs along Oronto Creek, then to the west on Iron County parcels bordering the Bad River Reservation. Heading south, the corridor would cross US Highway 2, Old WI Highway 10, and State Highway 169, passing within a mile west of Gurney, WI (population 159 in 2010). Here, the corridor would join the Potato River Valley, near Potato River Falls, which would be one of the scenic highlights of the route. There are a series of three falls in this area, with a total drop of approximately 100 feet, and they are considered some of the most impressive in Wisconsin. The Iron County Forestry and Parks Department manages 5 primitive campsites (pit toilet, no drinking water) near the Falls, along with observation platforms, and trails. This site is accessed by heading west on Potato Falls Road from State Highway 169. The trail route itself would most likely be laid out on the right bank of the Potato River which flows SE to NW in this area. The corridor would take the trail up the Potato River drainage on Iron County forestry land heading east along the northern edge of Blueberry Marsh, then generally south following the Potato River to a point that is on the high ridge overlooking Upson Lake. It would then turn Southwest for about a mile, where it would join an existing, certified 3.4 mile long segment of the North Country Trail at Casey Sag Road about 4 miles north of Upson, WI,. The route then follows this 3.4-mile certified segment to Wren Falls.

Near Wren Falls, a new bridge would be built to take the trail to the west side of the Tylers Fork River. The route would then angle Northwest and West utilizing additional Iron County Forest land until again approaching the Tylers Fork River. About ¼-mile south of the river the route would utilize permanent easements that have been secured by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources from several different private parties. Another large bridge would be required to cross the river but the alignment following public lands continues all the way to Copper Falls State Park.

Entering the park, the alignment angles generally west and then south across newly acquired Wisconsin State park lands and eventually joins the existing, certified segment of the North Country Trail.

A connector trail to the Ironwood/Hurley Area is part of this alternative. This would allow hikers from the communities of Hurley/Ironwood area to access the main North Country Trail, and the Copper Peak Area via a multiuse recreation trail. Bicyclists would be able to ride from these towns, then work a hike on the NCT into their trip. This trail would be developed by those communities, most likely within the North portion of the corridor identified in the No Action Alternative, and may make use of existing road and utility rights of way. Following North Country Trail marking standards, this trail would be a “white blazed trail”, as opposed to the blue blazes which mark certified North Country Trail segments. There is potential to make use of the corridor proposed in the No Action Alternative to complete a loop with the northern

alternative, however there would be significant hurdles to secure a trail across large areas of private land ownership in small parcels.

Corridor from Casey Sag Road to Copper Falls State Park. From Casey Sag Road, the corridor continue on DNR lands and existing constructed sections of the North Country Trail to continue to Copper Falls State Park, Wisconsin via a constructed segment of the North Country Trail in Iron County. It is in Copper Falls State Park that the corridor enters Ashland County, WI.

Mitigation Measures

The following mitigation measures were developed to minimize the degree and/or severity of adverse effects and would be implemented during design and implementation of the Selected Alternative, as needed:

Invasive Species

Install a wayside exhibit and boot brush, to inform hikers about the existence of invasive species, their effect on the native environment, appearance, and control measures. These interpretive materials include information about how the hiker can help to limit the spread of invasive species by staying on the trail and using the boot brushes.

Wood turtle protection

This turtle can be found near sandy-bottomed streams and rivers, and in the summer may forage in woods and upland areas. The species is especially vulnerable to human contact, and there is a potential it may be encountered on the trail by hikers. Outreach measures such as interpretive signs and trail crew briefings would be employed to instruct trail users to not handle or otherwise disturb turtles or other wildlife on the trail.

Trail construction practices

Appendix D contains the section of the North Country National Scenic Trail Handbook that specifies the most low impact trail design standards.

Cultural resources surveys

As trail segments are laid out on the ground, the process identified in section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act will be completed for each NPS undertaking which has the potential to impact cultural resources. Due to the flexible nature of nature of trail design, the trail alignment will be rerouted if cultural resources are encountered. NPS will coordinate archaeological surveys according to Department of the Interior Standards.

Water quality permits

Once the trail alignment is planned, the need for structures such as puncheons, boardwalks, and bridges will be determined and water quality permits will be obtained in cooperation with the appropriate landowners.

State listed Sensitive Species

Once on the ground trail alignments are determined, the NPS will consult with State heritage Program staff in both Michigan and Wisconsin to determine any possible effects of trail construction and use on these species.

Other Alternatives Analyzed in Environmental Assessment

The other alternative analyzed in the Environmental Assessment is the No Action Alternative. Under this alternative, the corridor referenced in the National Trails System Act and the 1982 Comprehensive Plan would continue to be the basis for locating the trail. For comparative purposes, the width of this corridor was created at roughly 3 miles wide, and it covers 66,021 acres. Below is the 1982 description for the trail within the planning area:

Existing and potential routes continue through the Ottawa National Forest to Ironwood, MI and the Wisconsin State line. As the NCT crosses into Wisconsin, it follows a high potential route and a portion of the Uller Trail developed by the Iron County Young Adult Conservation Corps and maintained by the Penokee Rangers, a private trail organization. A general route continues to Copper Falls State Park where the NCT would follow existing trails in the park.

Alternatives Considered But Dismissed

Several variations on the alternatives were evaluated but either dropped from consideration because they provided no substantial improvements over the proposed alternative, or features were incorporated into the northern alternative. One alternative corridor that headed directly south from Saxon Harbor Recreation Area to Saxon, and on south to Casey Sag Road would have meant crossing at least 50 small parcels of private land, and bypassing a very scenic portion of the Potato River. Another proposal was to develop a side trail to Spirit Lake at the northeastern side of the study area-this alternative was absorbed into the corridor for the northern alternative.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) and the National Park Service Director's Order 12 require the NPS to identify the alternative that best promotes the goals of Section 101 of the National Environmental Protection Act. The environmentally preferred alternative is defined by the CEQ as: "...the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources" (CEQ 1981). The Environmental Assessment showed the impacts of the alternatives analyzed are so similar that either would be environmentally preferable.

The Selected Alternative and Significance Criteria

As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following ten criteria:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial:

No long-term major adverse or beneficial impacts were identified that require analysis in an environmental impact statement. The selected alternative will result in minor adverse impacts that would be short and long term to wetlands and water quality provided the trail tread is built to NPS standards and principles identified in the 1995 *North Country Trail Handbook for Construction and Maintenance*. The impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitat from the northern alternative would be less than 1% of the planning area, due to 13.5 acres of ground disturbance for trail tread construction, and 27 acres of understory vegetation cleared for the trail corridor. These impacts will be adverse, short and long term, and minor with implementation of the mitigation measures. Other impacts of trail development would be beneficial minor, and short to long term by providing health and wellness benefits, and potentially protecting lands in the trailway.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety:

There would be no safety impacts due to implementation of the northern alternative and minor health benefits as described above.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas:

There are no impacts to any of these resources caused by the selected alternative.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment is likely to be highly controversial:

Implementation of the selected alternative will not result in controversial effects on the human environment.

5. Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks:

There were no highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks identified either during the preparation of the environmental assessment or during the public review period.

6. Degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration:

The selected alternative neither establishes a National Park Service precedent for future actions with significant effects nor represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts:

No other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future management activities were identified in the planning area that could contribute to cumulatively significant impacts to resources of concern. Potential cumulative effects of multiuse trail development and County Forest Management activities were evaluated in the Environmental Assessment to understand possible cumulative impacts, but the magnitude of the impacts of building the North Country Trail are minute in comparison.

8. Degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources:

This action will not adversely affect any resources listed on, or eligible for, the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it impact any other significant park resources. Cultural resource database surveys and literature reviews were carried out for the project area in both Wisconsin and Michigan to determine the distribution and nature of cultural resources. The results are provided at a general level, to the nearest 40 acre parcel in Wisconsin, and with general locations provided in Michigan. The NPS carried out consultations with the State Historic Preservation Officers in both states on a finding that the selection of the trail corridor would have “No Adverse Affect” on historical resources, and that site specific cultural resources surveys and consultations will be done once on-the-ground trail alignments are determined.

9. Degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its critical habitat:

Federally Listed Threatened and Endangered Species/State Listed Sensitive Species: The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) lists Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), a species federally listed as threatened, as possibly occurring in Gogebic County, Michigan and Iron County, Wisconsin, and piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) in Iron County. The National Park Service initiated informal consultations by letter on June 21, 2012 with USFWS field offices in East Lansing, Michigan and Green Bay, Wisconsin on possible impacts of the project. On July 18, 2012 the USFWS East Lansing office concurred that the project would not likely have adverse effects on Lynx or their habitat. The Green Bay office responded on September 4, 2012 with a concurrence that the project would not likely have adverse effects on piping plover or Canada lynx on the Wisconsin side of the border.

Database surveys were done of the Wisconsin and Michigan state heritage databases of sensitive animals and plants. The planning team felt that with the exception of the wood turtle, which could be disturbed during trail construction and use within any of

the planning area, it would not be possible to assess effects of trail construction on other species, without having an actual alignment for the trail, so this topic was eliminated from further analysis.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local environmental protection law:

The selected alternative will not violate any Federal, State, or local environmental protection laws. *The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources coordinated closely with the National Park Service on the route planning, and this document addresses not only Federal compliance requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act, but also State of Wisconsin Requirements under the Wisconsin Environmental Policy Act. In their final review of this document, the State of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Environmental Coordinator asked to clarify the jurisdiction of the Federal government on National Scenic Trails. Under the National Scenic Trail Act of 1968 as amended, the Secretary of Interior, through the National Park Service, is charged with selecting the route for the trail, and developing it with partners, but has no legal jurisdiction on other agencies or private owner's land other than the use of the official trail emblem to mark and promote the trail.*

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The NPS and planning team members made numerous informal contacts with the public, and state and local government, since the planning process began in 2007. A formal scoping meeting with state and local governments was held October 18, 2007 in Wakefield, MI and a public meeting was held on September 24, 2008 at Gogebic County Community College in Ironwood, MI.

A public open house meeting sponsored by the NPS and Wisconsin DNR was held on August 8, 2012 at the Iron County Courthouse in Hurley, Wisconsin from 4-8 pm. Eighteen members of the public and local agencies attended, and were invited to provide comments on the alternatives. Several comments were received by email and in writing. These comments favored the northern alternative (alternative 2) as having the most scenery, and making the best use of existing public land.

The Environmental Assessment was posted on the National Park Service Planning, Environment, and Public Comment website for public comment briefly in August 2012, from March 13 through April 19, 2013. Three comments were received, all favoring Alternative 2 and the Connector to the Ironwood-Hurley Area.

COORDINATION WITH OTHER PLANS

CONCLUSION

The selected alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). The selected alternative will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative environment impacts that could occur are negligible to minor in intensity. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, or other unique characteristics of the region. There are no unmitigated adverse impacts on sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. No uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action will not violate any Federal, State, or local environmental protection law. No national park resources or values will be impaired as a result of this action, and the action does not violate the National Park Service Organic Act.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended:

Mark Weaver, Superintendent
North Country National Scenic Trail

Date

Approved:

Michael Reynolds, Director
Midwest Region

Date

PRELIMINARY DECISION

In accordance with s. 1.11, Wis. Stats., and Ch. NR 150, Wis. Adm. Code, the Department is authorized and required to determine whether it has complied with s. 1.11, Wis. Stats., and ch. NR 150, Wis. Adm. Code.

The Department has made a preliminary determination that the Environmental Impact Statement process will not be required for this action/project. This recommendation does not represent approval from other DNR sections which may also require a review of the action/project.

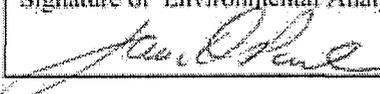
Signature of Evaluator 	Date Signed 6/14/13
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FINAL DECISION

The public review process has been completed. The Department received and fully considered 6 responses to the news release or other notice.

Pursuant to s. NR 150.22(2)a., Wis. Adm. Code, the attached analysis of the expected impacts of this proposal is of sufficient scope and detail to conclude that this is not a major action, and therefore the environmental impact statement process is not required prior to final action by the Department.

The Department has determined that it has complied with s. 1.11, Wis. Stats., and ch. NR 150, Wis. Adm. Code. This decision does not represent approval from other DNR sections which may also require a review of the action/project.

Signature of Environmental Analysis Program Staff 	Date Signed 06/14/2013
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NOTICE OF APPEAL RIGHTS

If you believe that you have a right to challenge this decision, you should know that the Wisconsin statutes and administrative rules establish time periods within which requests to review Department decisions must be filed. For judicial review of a decision pursuant to sections 227.52 and 227.53, Wis. Stats., you have 30 days after the decision is mailed, or otherwise served by the Department, to file your petition with the appropriate circuit court and serve the petition on the Department. Such a petition for judicial review must name the Department of Natural Resources as the respondent.

To request a contested case hearing pursuant to section 227.42, Wis. Stats., you have 30 days after the decision is mailed, or otherwise served by the Department, to serve a petition for hearing on the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources. All requests for contested case hearings must be made in accordance with section NR 2.05(5), Wis. Adm. Code, and served on the Secretary in accordance with section NR 2.03, Wis. Adm. Code. The filing of a request for a contested case hearing does not extend the 30 day period for filing a petition for judicial review.