

Brule River State Forest

A Review of the 2002 Master plan



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Introduction and Master Plan Review

The Brule River State Forest (BRSF) is a remarkable place with a rich natural and cultural history. The 47,000 acre State Forest provides numerous recreational opportunities and active forest management program providing ecological, economic and social benefits. Recreation, forest and property management is currently guided by the master plan approved in 2002, as well as numerous plan variances since that time.

Purpose of a Master Plan Review

A master plan review process assesses the plan's capability to meet present and long-term needs for resource management and conservation, and public use. The plan review should describe whether the plan is functioning well, or whether changes or additions should be considered. After completing a plan review process the department submits a report and recommendations to the Natural Resources Board (NRB). Administrative Code, NR 44, requires the department to review each property master plan (approved after 1996) every 15 years to determine if any changes should be made. Specifically, NR 44.04(12) states:

The department shall review master plans every 15 years and make recommendations to the board. The board shall determine whether the plan is to be amended, revised or extended for another 15-year period. A master plan shall remain in effect until the board takes action to modify it. The department shall take measures to reasonably notify interested persons of a 15-year plan review, and then shall use an appropriate public involvement process to determine or examine issues related to management and use of the property and the need for plan revision.

Overview of Brule River State Forest

Located in eastern Douglas County in northwest Wisconsin, the Brule River State forest is approximately 30 miles north to south. It ranges from six miles wide at the south end, two miles wide for much of its length, and has eight miles of frontage on Lake Superior. The town of Brule is located at the junction of HWY 2 and HWY 27 and is approximately 35 miles east of the city of Superior. The master plan project boundary includes approximately 82,500 acres of which 47,460 are in state ownership. BRSF contains the entire 44 mile long Bois Brule River and 45% of its watershed.

Three major ecoregions/soil types are represented on BRSF. The red clay soil of the Lake Superior Clay Plain on the north end of the forest supports a landscape that is a mixture of farmland, aspen stands and spruce-fir remnants. This area is dissected by numerous drainages, all carrying water to Lake Superior. The Bayfield Sand Barrens found on the south end of the forest has very dry sandy soils and supports a mixed pine forest, pine barrens, and pine plantation forest cover. It is also the site of the "Brule spillway", which contains the headwaters of both the Brule and St. Croix rivers. The Mille Lacs Uplands lies in the middle and western areas of the BRSF and contains sandy and gravelly soils which support mixed hardwood and pine forests.

The habitats located within BRSF support a diverse mix of wildlife species typically found within this area of the state. Many occurrences of rare, threatened, and endangered species can be found in the high quality aquatic and wetland habitat areas associated with the Brule River. The fishery supports brook trout, rainbow trout, brown trout, Coho salmon, and Chinook salmon. A lamprey barrier exists on the lower river to block passage of sea lampreys from traveling up the river to reproduce.

The Brule River State Forest is highly regarded for the water-based recreation opportunities it offers. The river is a premier trout fishery in the region and attracts anglers from across the Midwest. The river offers canoeing and kayaking opportunities ranging from Class I to Class III (high water) that are not comparable to any other in the region. Forest-based recreation is quite popular, and typical activities include hunting for a variety of game, hiking on one of many of the designated hiking trails, and snowmobiling. Camping occurs within the Bois Brule or Copper Range campgrounds which can be accessed from the river, by boat or driven to. Several picnic areas offer drive up locations to enjoy the Brule River or area

lakes. The Afterhours ski trail has become a cross country skiing destination and is well known across the upper Midwest skiing community.

Master Plan 15-year Review Process

The plan review process involves several steps. The first step of assessing property data utilizing information presented at annual Integrated Property Planning Meetings. This information includes property data such as project acreage, boundary lines, and forest resource data. Additional information from the annual meetings includes public use data, facility assessments, access issues, user trends, and feedback from stakeholders. The status of resource and public use data was evaluated and any significant changes in conditions to habitat or public use were identified.

Second, using information from available and updated assessment data, including information from public user groups and local units of government, an internal review was conducted of how well the current plan is performing. Issues and opportunities were identified and included in this document. A public involvement process will be conducted to gather public input on the plan review and any changes or additions that should be considered.

Lastly, the outcome of the plan review will be reported to the NRB and recommendations will be made as to whether the plan should be extended without change or modified. If changes are recommended, the areas or elements proposed will be specified. If the proposed plan modifications are minimal and they can be made without further analysis or review, a request for NRB approval of a specific plan amendment may be made.

Issues and Opportunities Identified in the Plan Review

A number of issues and opportunities were identified as part of this plan review. These were identified initially from annual monitoring, integrated meetings, partnership meetings, tribal consultation, and public meetings and direct user feedback. A list of preliminary issues and opportunities are shared for public input as well as an opportunity to identify additional items the plan review should considered.

Recreation Issues and Opportunities

- Reaffirm current plans and desire for an outdoor group campsite along the Brule River for larger groups.
- Rising interests and desire for mountain bike trails and ski journeying trail designations.
- Appropriately sized angler parking opportunities at high use areas to access the river
- Desire for electric campsites at Copper Range campground
- Desire for Lake Superior water trail campsites
- Opportunity for indoor group campsites at Afterhours ski trail system
- Public access to Big Lake for recreational use
- Public canoe landing at FF landing

Land Management

- Recognize invasive species impacts, including Emerald Ash Borer (EAB)
- Continue hemlock monitoring and regeneration objectives
- Inclusion of recent biotic inventory findings and report
- Continued efforts for habitat management for salmonid species along river systems
- Land Management Classification review as part of larger statutory directive for all Northern State Forests

Project boundary and ownership

- Recognition of significant acquisitions and public access easements on private lands within the existing project and adjust project boundary to reflect those changes.

Fisheries and Water Management

Current Conditions

The Plan's description of fisheries and water resources and their management are relevant today, although Hilsenhoff Biotic Index monitoring no longer occurs. The Plan discussed fisheries habitat management in Area 4 (Brule River Scenic Management Area):

The development and maintenance of habitat for salmonid species within the Brule River system is important to the high quality sport fishery. This work is planned and conducted by fisheries management staff. As part of the Department's integrated management planning these management actions are also described in property master plans.

Naturally reproducing, self-sustaining stream-resident and lake-run fish populations are the vision for the future, accomplished mainly through habitat management and angling regulations. Salmonid populations have been and will continue to be monitored through electrofishing, video monitoring and angler creel census.

The Plan specifically mentioned habitat modifications such as gravel and wood installations to increase spawning substrates and cover, beaver control to maintain spawning areas, and stream bank stabilization to reduce sedimentation. In addition to these measures, road-stream crossing inventories and upgrades are important to maximize fish passage throughout the watershed and should be noted in the Plan.

The sea lamprey barrier discussed in the Plan is also relevant today, as lamprey control is an ongoing international effort to managing Great Lakes sea lamprey populations.

Recreation Management

Current Conditions

The recreation management objective for the BRSF is to emphasize silent sport opportunities with limited rustic development. The primary recreational activities provided on the BRSF include paddling, fishing, hunting, cross-country skiing, camping, hiking, wildlife viewing, and snowmobiling.

The current plan calls for the renovation of the Bois Brule Campground to remove some individual campsites and to construct a separate outdoor group camp. This outdoor group camp would help accommodate the frequent camp groups such as church camps and scout groups, who desire large sites to accommodate more than 6 people.

The plan also calls for the elimination of several sites in the Copper Range Campground and the development of secluded walk-in sites. Since the formation of the BRSF master plan, several sites have been removed in the Bois Brule Campground, and engineering plans have been drawn up for the outdoor group camp. A master plan variance was completed to install two walk-in campsites in the Bois Brule campground. These two sites were installed and have been very popular with campers. In the Copper Range Campground, one campsite has been removed, and another will be removed upon the construction of a new toilet building. At that time, three new walk-in sites will be constructed.

River access facility improvements called for in the 2002 master plan have been accomplished. All canoe landings now have artesian or hand wells available with the exception of the Stone Chimney walk-in access and the Hwy P undeveloped landing.

Interpretive kiosks called for by the master plan have been installed at most angler access lots and canoe landings as well as at all campgrounds and picnic areas.

The new picnic area on Lake Superior at Bracket's Corner proposed by the plan is still viable and has been submitted into the Development Project System and is awaiting approvals and funding.

Trail maintenance and development prescribed by the BRSF master plan has been accomplished. Approximately 30 miles of Hunter Walking Trails have been maintained and increased to approximately 61 miles. The hiking trail connector called for in the plan to link the North Country Trail with the Stony Hill Nature Trail, Bois Brule Campground, CCC site, and fish hatchery has been built.

Currently, the Afterhours Ski Trail System continues to be highly utilized and sought after by skiers and snowshoers during winter months. Trail improvements including a new classic trail as well as several significant combination skating and classical loops have been constructed, making the Afterhours Ski Trail system one of the most highly used systems in northwest Wisconsin.

The existing BRSF plan calls for the construction of a new 20-25 mile ski trail system with a 100 car parking lot on the east side of HWY 27 near Samples Rd. This trail has not yet been constructed and the feasibility of managing an additional ski area needs to be assessed.

The current master plan for the BRSF also calls for the development of a scenic overlook at the Waino Rock on the west side of Hwy H just south of Hwy FF. This overlook would include a six to eight car parking lot and a half-mile trail from the parking area to the overlook. This overlook has not yet been constructed.

Another development project called for in the 2002 plan that has not yet been constructed is the creation of a snowmobile loop extension at Jersech Creek. This proposal involves a 200 yd. long trail extension that would lead riders to a scenic overlook of the Brule Bog on the terrace adjacent to Jersech Creek. Construction of this overlook is planned to coincide with a red pine timber sale planned to occur in 2017.

Considerations:

Development of camper cabins in the ski trail area. An area of the ski trail would be well-suited to the development of one or two camper cabins. There is an area with summer road access that has an already constructed Adirondack-style shelter. Along with the planned installation of a pit toilet in the area would serve the potential camper cabins. An indoor group camp area has proven to be popular on other properties.

Construction of Mountain Bike Trails. This is certainly a growing sport, and fits well within the property's silent sports niche. A possible location would incorporate bike trails within the footprint of the already developed Afterhours ski trail area.

A possible ski-joring trail. This could possibly be developed in an area adjacent to the existing ski trail, which would allow those who prefer to ski with their dogs a place to do so.

A possible additional loop to the already popular Afterhours ski trail.

Angler parking/Hwy 13 canoe landing overflow parking on the north side of Hwy 13. There is a site already partially developed that was the site of a house that was removed approximately ten years ago that could serve this dual purpose.

Consider adding a canoe landing at County Highway FF to allow users flexibility for nearby rapids.

Possible addition of electric campsites at Copper Range campground. This campground is highly sought after both during early spring as well as for late falls camping, mostly associated with the Brule's fishing season. Electric service is already within the campground due to one site being a designated camp host site. Many current users request to use generators, which are not allowed.

There has been some desire from groups associated with the Lake Superior Water Trail to develop several campsites within the BRSF to accommodate people traveling Lake Superior by boat. The miles of public ownership associated with the Brule River State Forest were identified as a potential location for designated campsites to be noted on water trail maps.

Big Lake is a very popular destination for anglers visiting the property. Currently, the only public access to this area is

through privately owned land. Currently, the owner allows public access through a permit system. It has been suggested to develop a walk in canoe landing access across state property adjacent to Rush Lake Road.

There is a current hiking trail that connects the Copper Range Campground to the Bayfield Hiking Trail. While this gives visitors to the campground some access to hiking opportunities, a loop trail closer to the campground would increase the hiking opportunities for these property users. The addition of the loop trail off of the existing connector trail should be considered.

Angling still continues to be a very popular activity at Brule. The Forest strives to provide safe and effective access points to the river for this user group. It has been noted that there are a few areas that could use additional parking. Both are along Hwy H in the areas known as Shumway and the Spruce Plantation. The addition of two small (five car) parking areas would allow anglers to park off of Hwy H in areas that are desired to access the river.

There is a network of existing trails (longstanding history of use) within the Lake Minnuesing area that are presently being utilized for horseback riding, hiking, and mountain biking. Conflicts between user groups have occurred, but have been mostly self-managed. The future use and maintenance of these trails should be assessed during the master planning process.

Motorized Access

Current Conditions:

Motorized vehicle access to the BRSF is currently through a network of town and county roads, as well as three state highways. The publicly maintained road system provides adequate access to areas of the state forest for management and public recreation purposes. These roads range from State Highways 2 and 27 that are all season highways which do not get posted with seasonal weight limits. Douglas County manages roadway systems that are all paved roads with seasonal weight limits to protect the roadway from damages primarily during spring thaw conditions. Town roads are managed through the towns of Cloverland, Brule, Highland, Solon Springs, Bennett, and Gordon. Some of the roads are paved, while most are gravel or native material. Overall, the town, county, and state road systems adequately provide access to the State Forest for both recreation and management access.

There is a network of low maintenance roads and logging trails on state forest property that provide further access into the interior of the property. In general, the sandy soils on the south end of the property will support year-round traffic with minimal maintenance necessary to maintain the existing forest road network. The roads found on the clay soil areas on the northern part of the property are generally only useable during very dry or frozen road conditions and are closed to public traffic through a variety of methods to protect the roadbed from vehicle damage. All roads that are opened for timber sale activities are assessed for potential resource degradation and are either left open to allow for firewood harvesting for up to two years, or are immediately closed to public traffic to prevent resource damage.

Some road networks have been designated as hunter walking trails and are periodically mowed to maintain them as open trails. These areas include Hilltop Road, Anderson Road, Beupre Springs, Miller Road, Afterhours, and the "New Addition" trails. The "New Addition" trails are located within a 6,000 acre block of forest and purchased in 2007 which was formerly held by an industrial forest owner. There was a long history of ATV access for hunting purposes in this block of land, and the trails were maintained through that use. Since state ownership did not allow ATV use without a disability permit, hunters must walk to gain access into these large blocks of forest ownership. Mowing the trails has allowed continued use into the property for hunting and other outdoor activities, and the level of access provided has generally been accepted by most users of the property. Occasional requests do come in for increased access into the clay soil areas of the forest by primarily hunters wanting to access areas using ATVs.

Recreational motorized access is provided primarily through the 32 miles of snowmobile/winter ATV trail system that runs through the forest. The trail is groomed and maintained through contract with a local snowmobile club. Most town road systems with the state forest are designated as ATV routes, and provide opportunities for access into and through the forest. The Tri-County Corridor is a former railroad corridor running from Superior to Ashland. This trail, managed by the

Tri-County Corridor commission, is a motorized recreational trail crossing the property as it parallels Hwy 2 through Brule and provides year around recreational opportunities for all off-road motorized users.

Considerations

The possibility for a new trail connector exists from the Bayfield County route to the town of Brule through an existing snowmobile trail. Some challenging wetland areas within the existing trail corridor could prevent this from occurring.

Land Management

The Land Management current conditions and proposed Land Management Classifications are included in a concurrent Northern State Forest Master Plan variance document. Publication number FR-608-2016 and found on the Departments web site and searching "property master planning."

Land Acquisition and Project Boundary

Current Conditions

Since the 2002 master plan there has been significant changes in land ownership. The 2002 project boundary encompassed large areas of industrial-owned forest lands on the north and south ends of the BRSF. The northern boundary expansion area was mostly brought under state ownership with an approximately 5,880 acre purchase of land for \$6,319,048 in 2007. Locally known as the "New Addition", this purchase greatly expanded public ownership in the local township and maintained a long history of forest-based recreation on these lands which were formerly open for public access through the forest crop law program.

On the southern end of the BRSF, the acquisition boundary expansion also encompassed a large area of private industrial forest ownership. The bulk of this property changed ownership with a new owner purchasing the land, then subsequently selling a forest legacy easement to the State of Wisconsin, forever guaranteeing public access to these lands for highly sought after public recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, snowmobile trail use, berry picking, and trapping. This easement encompasses land both within and outside of the current state forest boundary, and as a whole includes over 67,000 acres of land on which conservation easements were purchased between 2012 and 2014 at a cost of over \$17,000,000. The forest land owner continues to manage timber and other land resources. In addition the department has purchased small scattered parcels from willing sellers within the acquisition boundary. Approximately 700 acres of scattered lands amongst 21 parcels have been acquired at a cost of about \$1,400,000 since 2002. The parcels purchased are scattered throughout the forest and include both river front properties as well as vacant forest land. The majority of these purchases occurred prior to 2010, since that time, monies available for real estate purchases statewide have been directed towards large land and easement acquisitions such as the forest legacy easement as listed above.

Considerations

Currently, no significant boundary expansion options are being considered, however given the fact that significant lands within the current project boundary have been purchased with a conservation easement for public access and nature based recreation activities there may be opportunities to reduce the existing project boundary in those areas.