

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This corner of the once expansive Sauk Prairie has a uniquely complicated and consequential human and natural history. The 7,300-acre Badger Army Ammunition Plant, known by many as simply “Badger,” has touched people’s lives in profound and uncommon ways and, as a result, justifiably engenders many passionate feelings. The land here means different things to people depending on how they connect to the property, its past and future.

At its inception, the Badger Ordnance Works, as the facility was initially named, was the largest manufacturer of propellant in the world. The construction and operation of the plant had significant impacts on neighboring communities. With over 10,000 workers involved in the initial construction in 1942 and over 6,000 people working in continuous shifts at the plant during WWII, the region quickly recovered from the Great Depression. Today, several

Workers removing nitro-cotton from a kneading machine.



Badger History Group archives

local businesses remain that got their starts in the early days of constructing and operating Badger. Although the plant fueled economic growth, disposal of waste products and contaminants followed the protocols of the day, which are now recognized as improper and inadequate. The result was contaminated soil and groundwater. Few places in the state have had such a substantive impact on the daily lives of nearby residents who rightly have strong beliefs about future use of the property.

Prior to the construction of the plant, the site was home to some 80 farm families that raised a variety of crops and animals on the exceptionally fertile soils. On short notice, families – some who had farmed their land for generations – were evicted. Like the Native Americans before them, these families did not want to leave their homes. Those hoping to remain in farming were forced to quickly find other properties to purchase, followed by the grueling task of moving their animals, hay and stored grains, equipment, and personal possessions – all in the middle of winter. Some farm families, upset at the perceived cut-rate offers for their land, found themselves in the

difficult position of petitioning the federal government for a fairer price at a time when the national mood encouraged self-sacrifice in the face of world war. These former residents and their descendants understandably have deep-rooted feelings about this land and its future.

Beginning long before settlement by Euro-Americans, the Ho-Chunk people inhabited the area, growing numerous crops and living off of bison, elk, deer and other game. The Ho-Chunk Nation’s connections to this area are both deep and unique and, as neighboring landowners, the Nation appropriately has a keen interest in the department’s plans for management and use of Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area.

In the face of the massive land use changes resulting from the construction, operation, and maintenance of the propellant plant, an unintended but positive ecological outcome emerged. With fire an annual threat even when the plant was idled, many parts of the facility were grazed and mowed to reduce fuel loads. Although they lacked the diversity of native prairies, these grasslands provided the right structure and conditions for many birds. As changing agricultural practices and conversions of

***Landowners of the former
Badger Army Ammunition Plant***

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources	3,385 acres
Dairy Forage Research Center	2,105 acres
Ho-Chunk Nation.....	1,553 acres
Bluffview Sanitary District.....	164 acres
Wisconsin Department of Transportation	60 acres
Town of Sumpter	4 acres

farmland decimated populations of grassland birds throughout the Midwest, meadowlarks, bobolinks, bobwhite quail, dickcissels and others thrived at Badger. Like other military installations around the country, the Badger complex became a refuge for numerous rare species.

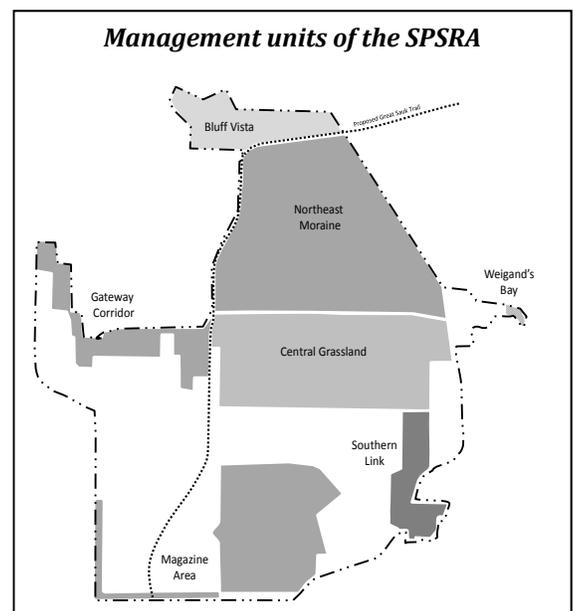
For many current Wisconsin residents, Badger has been and remains the mysterious place on the “other side of the fence.” For decades, thousands of cars a day drove past the enormous industrial complex that represented the single largest and most visible expression of Wisconsin’s contribution to World War II and the Korea and Vietnam conflicts. Today, nearly all of the 1,400 buildings that comprised the plant have been taken down, utilities lines, steam pipes, and railroads have been removed, countless tons of materials have been recycled, and contaminated sites have been remediated. Vast and imposing in its day, the infrastructure of Badger has been nearly eliminated from the landscape.

Although most of the physical vestiges of the site’s past – representing the lives of native peoples, the farms and community of the Euro-American settlers, and the manufacturing facility that supplied our national defense – are now largely gone, the human connections to this place remain.

The master plan

This master plan lays out the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources’ (department) proposal for the management and use of Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area (SPSRA). SPSRA comprises about half of the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant (BAAP) and came to state ownership through the Federal Lands to Parks program following the formal decommissioning of the property. The department’s ownership is not a contiguous block, but an irregular arrangement primarily in two holdings. The department will continue working with the other landowners of the former BAAP on a variety of common issues related to land management and public recreation.

Much is proposed in this master plan. To more easily present and implement the proposed recreation uses and habitat management actions, the property is divided into seven management units based upon commonalities of their vegetation, past and future uses, and other factors. Each unit has a set of objectives and an associated group of strategies to achieve them.



What is proposed for recreation?

A blend of recreation activities that take advantage of the property’s attributes and features are proposed, including a variety of trails for hiking, biking, horseback riding, snowmobiling and snow shoeing. The department’s goal is to provide high quality half-day or day-long experiences for a range of abilities. Being immediately adjacent to Devil’s Lake State Park, SPSRA is well positioned to provide many activities that complement the camping, swimming, fishing, hiking, picnicking and other opportunities provided there.

Hunting and bird watching, as well as fishing along Lake Wisconsin at the old pump house, are expected to be very popular at SPSRA. In addition, a 72-acre Class 2 dog training ground is proposed in the far southern portion of the property. Several day use areas – with shelters, picnic tables, grills, vault toilets, and educational kiosks – are also proposed. Building on the popularity of the rocket launch site at Bong State Recreation Area in Kenosha County, the department is proposing a small, 2-acre site at SPSRA for clubs to launch rockets up to 10 days a year.

A key component of the recreational activities will be to incorporate the property’s human and natural history into visitor experiences through a variety of approaches. Fortunately, a local history group has assembled an impressive

array of artifacts, pictures, and stories from the BAAP era. Few places in Wisconsin or the Midwest are as rich with cultural, historical, geologic, and ecological stories and the department seeks to capitalize on this unique opportunity.

During the planning process the department received many responses to the potential inclusion of ATVs (and motorized recreation in general) and a shooting range at SPSRA; a large majority of the reaction was in opposition to both. After considerable deliberations, the department proposes to re-purpose up to half of the biking and equestrian trails and roads at SPSRA for use by dual-sport motorcycles on up to six days each year. The trails would be closed to other users during these days. No ATV trails or riding opportunities are proposed at SPSRA.

Although no shooting range is proposed in this master plan, the department recognizes the need to provide additional public shooting ranges in southern Wisconsin. The department will continue evaluating options to meet this need at one of its properties in the area, including the Lower Wisconsin Riverway, SPSRA, or other lands in Sauk County. The public will have multiple opportunities to provide input in the process of siting a new shooting range.

What is proposed for habitat management?

From a habitat perspective, Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area can play a pivotal role in the regional conservation of grasslands and savannas and their constituent species. Of particular note here are two unique opportunities: (a) managing lands as part of an ecological continuum of habitats from the southern dry-mesic forest (in Devil’s Lake State Park) to oak woodland to oak opening to grassland, and (b) managing large blocks of grassland and oak opening habitats. Although there are other large blocks of grassland habitat in southern and central Wisconsin, this is likely the largest and most viable opportunity to restore and manage a large-scale forest to grassland transition.

The plan proposes that much of SPSRA on the glacial moraine (generally east of the proposed Great Sauk Trail) be restored to oak opening, which was the dominant habitat present before settlement. In addition, a large part of the Central Grassland and part of the Magazine Area will be managed as open grassland. The Hillside Prairie, a high quality remnant that has long been the focus of local conservation efforts, is a priority to maintain and the master plan calls for the remnant to be expanded and connected with the larger grassland to the east.

Invasive species, particularly shrubs, have taken over large portions of SPSRA and are the most pressing management challenge. The plan calls for a variety of techniques to address these plants, including grazing.

Featured recreation opportunities (proposed)

- Visitor center with display space, outdoor amphitheater, interpretive trail & picnic area.
- Hiking trails (20 miles)
- Biking trails:
 - Recreational, family-friendly (15 miles)
 - Mountain bike (10 miles)
 - Great Sauk Trail (5 access points to SPSRA)
- Equestrian trails (12 miles)
- All hunting seasons from mid-October through the first three spring turkey periods. Pheasant stocking.
- Trapping from Nov. 15 to Feb. 15.
- Day use area at the former reservoir site with an overlook deck, shelter and amphitheater.
- Horse trailer parking, corral, and loading area with picnic shelter and vault toilet.
- Day use area at Weigand’s Bay with accessible fishing platform or pier, carry-in boat access and picnic shelter.
- Special event staging area with picnic shelter, vault toilet, grills, and a large grassy field.
- Rocketry site with launches up to 10 days/year.
- Lake Wisconsin overlook with shelter, picnic tables, grills and trailhead.
- Re-purposing trails and roads for use by dual-sport motorcycles (up to 6 days/year).
- Horse-drawn vehicles on equestrian trails.
- Snowmobile trail on the east side of the SPSRA.
- A 72-acre Class 2 dog training area.
- Off-leash dog use in part of the Magazine Area.

Habitat management (proposed)

Grasslands.....	1,519 acres
Oak Openings	1,647 acres
Oak Woodland.....	181 acres
Other	38 acres

Are portions of the property still contaminated? What hazards remain?

The site's use as an industrial facility that manufactured propellants resulted in contamination of some areas with chemicals and byproducts used in propellant manufacture, as well as asbestos, lead paint, PCBs and oil. Contaminants were found in buildings and storage areas and spread through the sewer system and ditches. Groundwater beneath the site is contaminated in four discrete plumes.

The U.S. Army and its contractors undertook extensive remediation efforts to address these contamination issues. As a result, all lands within SPSRA now meet the environmental thresholds for use as a recreation area. The Army continues to assess and test the groundwater and visitors will see monitoring wells (red pipes) throughout the property. The responsibility for maintaining the monitoring wells, landfills and capped areas remains permanently with the Army. The Army is also responsible for addressing any contamination resulting from its use of the BAAP property that may be found later.

What are the anticipated impacts of implementing the master plan?

The most substantial impact of implementing the proposed master plan will be the restoration of large blocks of grassland and savanna habitats that, in turn, are expected to lead to sizeable increases in populations of associated birds, mammals, insects and other species. Combined with the management of the adjacent 1,500-acre grassland tract on the Ho-Chunk lands, in the years to come this area is likely to support some of the most important populations of rare grassland birds in Wisconsin. The management of the ecological continuum of habitats from deep forest to savanna to grassland is also likely to be of regional importance.

The master plan proposes a wide variety of recreational uses at SPSRA as well as trail networks, day use areas, a visitor center, and other facilities to provide high quality experiences for visitors. The recreational uses of the property, including hunting, snowmobiling, mountain biking, rocketry, bird watching, dual-sport motorcycle riding, and others, are expected to have impacts to plants and animals, other visitors, and neighboring landowners. However, these impacts are expected to be limited in their intensity, duration, and geographic extent. In light of the substantial and long-term increases in populations of native species at SPSRA (including many rare species) that are anticipated from habitat restoration and management, the recreational uses of the property are expected to have relatively minor adverse impacts on the property's biological diversity.

The costs to restore native habitats, remove existing buildings and structures, develop new trails, build a visitor center and other facilities are expected to approach \$9 million dollars. Although these costs will be spread out over time and may be shared by several partner groups, it will be many years before the proposed vision described in this master plan is achieved. As opportunities for visitors to enjoy the property increase over time, visitation levels are expected to climb and with it an associated economic benefit to local communities and the state. The department expects many of the visitors to the adjacent Devil's Lake State Park will also visit SPSRA to bike, bird watch, learn about the site's past, and engage in other activities.

What happens next?

Although SPSRA opened to the public in April 2015, the property will be in a transition phase for many years to come. Other than trails on some of the former roads, currently there are no amenities for visitors. The department proposes to place initial focus on continuing to clean up rubble and debris, securing the few remaining buildings, filling the worst of the potholes, placing boundary signs, and other tasks to ensure that visitors have a safe experience.

The department is aware of strong interest in redeveloping two locations currently closed to the public: the reservoir site and the old pump house at Weigand's Bay. The enormous reservoirs are a safety hazard and need to be razed and filled in. The pump house, which has been an eyesore for neighbors, is also a safety concern in its current condition. In addition, other relics of the complex's past need to be removed, including many miles of deteriorating roads, numerous pipes and metal rods, and various utility structures and building foundations.

The agency will work with the Ho-Chunk Nation, Dairy Forage Research Center, Sauk County, local governments, and conservation, recreation, and education groups with an interest in helping SPSRA reach its potential. Of particular promise is interest expressed by the Wisconsin Army National Guard (WIARNG) to address some of the clean-up and development work at SPSRA as part of their training exercises. The department is in ongoing discussions with the WIARNG on this front.

As with the recreation facilities, there is far more habitat restoration and management work to be done than the department has the capacity to address over the next 15 years. Large areas of the property are dominated by invasive shrubs while other areas have been stripped of their topsoil. Some portions have been leveled, while others have been ditched. Non-native weeds are the primary vegetation in many places.

Initial management efforts will address the invasion of shrubs in areas that still provide some level of surrogate grassland and oak opening habitats and where prescribed fire remains an effective management technique. In some portions of the property, it is likely that other management approaches, such as aggressive brush cutting and grazing, will be needed before prescribed fire will succeed as a management technique. Another initial target will be to remove some of the pine plantations that fragment grasslands.

Many people who visit the property will want to better understand its history. Starting with the Ho-Chunk, followed by the early Euro-American settlers and farmers, and then the construction, operation, and eventual deconstruction and restoration of the BAAP, the property is one of Wisconsin's most consequential places and its profound past is of interest to many – both to tell and to hear. The department will rely on many others to help develop both the content and methods for telling the stories of this unique place.

Before the buildings were removed, the view looking north over a portion of the Gateway Corridor. Ho-Chunk Nation land is in the central part of the image and USH 12 can be seen in the upper left climbing over the Baraboo Hills.



John Olson, 2004

The upcoming implementation phase for SPSRA in many ways has its roots back in 2000 when the Sauk County Board of Supervisors established a locally-driven process to help shape the future of the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant. The Badger Reuse Committee, a 21-member group of representatives from neighboring communities, local, state, and federal governments, and the Ho-Chunk Nation, together forged a common vision, expounded through a set of values and criteria, "that can be meaningfully considered and realistically implemented by the appropriate local, state, and federal agencies." The proposed use and management of SPSRA described in the following pages is intended to help achieve important portions of the vision for the former BAAP crafted fifteen years ago.

Figure 1: Conceptual plan of the future Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area.

