

Summary of Comments – Northwest Barrens Properties Master Planning

August 20 – September 10, 2016

Second Public Comment Period

The Department of Natural Resources invited public comments on a draft master plan for the Northwest Barrens Properties during a second public involvement period of three weeks. Similar to an initial meeting held six months previously, an 'open house' style public meeting was hosted Tuesday evening August 30, 2016 at the Chicog Town Hall west of Minong, WI. Attendance was about half that of the initial meeting; only 22 people signed the attendance sheet.

DNR staff received significantly fewer public comments than during the initial outreach effort. Six people provided written comments during the open house. Approximately 22 people provided comments (16 in writing) via email, letters, online at the DNR website; by phone and direct contact with staff and via forms submitted at the open house. The public responded in favor overall to proposed management and public uses of the properties. There is significant interest in preserving and expanding ownership of the oak/pine barrens wildlife habitat, especially to restore a robust population of sharp-tailed grouse. Disappointment was expressed both at the lack of property boundary expansion that would have provided connectivity on the Totogatic Wild River parcels, and over the proposed sale of acreage there. The importance of maintaining the wild, natural setting within the Totogatic Wild River project is another continued theme.

Participants and Public Comments represented:

- Friends of Namekagon Barrens Wildlife Area
- General public with no particular affiliation mentioned
- Nearby property owners, and large company manager
- St. Croix River Association
- Spooner Advocate
- US Fish & Wildlife Service
- Washburn County Lakes and Rivers Association
- West Wisconsin Land Trust
- WI Sharp-tailed Grouse Society

Comments included the full range from very brief and general to detailed and specific, to far-reaching and policy-related. People supported the vision and goals, and most of the objectives and prescriptions of the draft master plan. The USFWS requested changes to the DNR lease agreement with Douglas County, and clarification to property objectives and prescriptions about secondary recreational uses of the properties, especially in regards to dog trialing. A summary of public comments is provided below, with recurring themes identified in the categories that were listed on the comment forms and letters received by the department.

- Land management
 - Very pleased with the major emphasis on oak/pine barrens habitat management. Recognize the importance of connecting barrens habitat for successful management and conservation of sharp-tailed grouse.
 - Pleased with results of prescribed burning and encourage its consistent use as one of the critical tools for barrens habitat management and invasive species control.
 - Suggestions were made to more actively pursue property acquisition within current boundaries.

- Wild River lands- in addition to this plan, the department should work with the 5 counties along the Totogatic Wild River to establish an overall strategy for protection of the river, with uniform land management, timber management and recreation goals.
 - One participant suggested creating a statewide zoning regulation for all wild rivers to prohibit all development within 300 feet of the rivers on all lands. (Note: this is beyond the scope of this master plan.)
 - One participant requested inclusion of private landowner efforts (Private Landowners Expanding Grasslands) outlined in a 14-page document. While such a request is outside the scope of this master planning effort, department staff identified collaboration potential for the group with the St. Croix Valley Monarch Partnership.
- Recreation & Access
 - USFWS requested a change to the DNR-Douglas County land use lease agreement, that removes the county recreation area of the Douglas County Wildlife Area from DNR leased lands (~ 30 acres), in order to be in compliance with a federal funding agreement for state wildlife areas. (Note: this change will not have an effect on public use of this recreation area.)
 - USFWS requested improvements in language to be clear that secondary recreational opportunities associated with Namekagon Barrens and Douglas County wildlife areas will not detract from their designated primary uses as places to hunt, trap, and fish; in particular with regard to dog trials.
 - Improved walk-in public access is needed for the Totogan Pines area.
 - Overall development on the Totogatic Wild River property should be minimal, staff oversight is crucial to enforce recreation policies and clarity should be added to the objectives in the plan to ensure the wilderness character is preserved as was intended when the property was purchased.
 - Boundary Modifications
 - There was continued interest expressed in preserving and expanding the DNR project boundary and future ownership to areas along the Totogatic River that would connect the separate project parcels along the river corridor. Disappointment that the department did not pursue this opportunity. "Private landowners deserve the right and opportunity to conserve their lands through sale, trade, easement, or donation to the state."
 - The north and south units of NBWA should be joined together.
 - Preserve and expand DNR ownership of oak/pine barrens habitat, especially in the interest of restoring and maintaining a genetically diverse and sustainable population of sharp-tailed grouse.
 - DNR should explore the possibility of acquiring leased lands within DCWA to ensure the continuity of management.
 - Emphatic support for the concept of a barrens partnership corridor from Namekagon Barrens north to Moquah Barrens, similar to the Crex-Namekagon Barrens partnership corridor - specifically preservation of the rare barrens ecological community for wildlife species conservation, increased habitat for hunting, tourism and job opportunities.
 - Other
 - One participant provided very touching and personal examples and narrative of the importance of outdoor experiences, clean rivers, and valued restoration of barrens and prairie habitat. The contributor desires similar goals for these state properties as what he and his family have been able to accomplish on their own land east of the properties and along the Namekagon River.

Thank you for your interest in these properties and their future management. We welcome your continued involvement as you enjoy the natural resources benefits these properties provide.