

DATE: October 1, 2013

TO: Natural Resource Board

FROM: Secretary Cathy Stepp

SUBJECT: Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest Master Plan Amendment
Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area Master Plan Amendment
Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area Master Plan Amendment continuance
Additional Willow Flowage SWA Master Plan Amendment Requests from Public

Thank you in advance for considering the approval of four Master Plan amendment elements.

The first proposal is to amend the master plan for the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest located in Vilas, Oneida and Iron Counties. The amendment designates the future use and management, including management classifications, objectives and prescriptions, for five parcels, totaling 3,100 acres, acquired since the approval of the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest master plan in 2005. Four of the five parcels, totaling 2,660 acres, will be managed under a forest production classification in the Winegar Moraines Area and one parcel, the Van Vliet Block, will be managed under a Native Community classification in the Hemlock Hardwood Area. One of the forest production blocks, the Ontonagon block, was identified, and is, designated as having characteristics that meet the needs of a statewide deer research project linked with the Kroll report. The proposed NHAL amendment also codifies current management of two existing designated State Natural Areas, totaling 998 acres located within the 2005 Master Plan boundary area. In addition, the NHAL plan amendment proposes the addition of camping opportunities on the Rainbow Flowage unit, including water accessible group sites, canoe sites, and a traditional group camp. The Rainbow Flowage unit was acquired during the approval process of the 2005 Master Plan but recreation interests were not fully known at that time and in the past few years, users have expressed interest in water camping opportunities. Nearly all of the public comments received on the NHAL amendment were related to Van Vliet Hemlock block, expressing concerns with the Departments proposal to conduct forest management on the northern portion of the block. The Department did modify the proposed management of the 73 acres in the final draft plan to reflect allowing natural processes to occur with the exception of invasive species control, the same as the rest of the Van Vliet block.

The second master plan amendment proposal is on the Willow Flowage Scenic Waters Area property located in Oneida County. The proposal addresses public interest for additional motorized access, primarily for fall hunting purposes. The proposed change would allow additional seasonal, from the Tuesday after labor day to December 15, public motorized access on a segment of Iron Gate Road totaling approximately 4 miles. A portion of Iron Gate Road is currently open year round for public vehicles and another section open seasonally. Iron Gate Road is currently maintained at a moderately developed standard and the currently closed segment is supporting vehicle use for forest and property management purposes. Iron Gate Road, in full, would also be open to ATV/UTVs during the same time period as vehicle access, creating an additional regional connector link using county forest and town roads to the existing Willow Flowage ATV trail already in place. ATV designation would remain in effect as long as

the town road on the west and County Highway Y remain designated as ATV routes.

The third request for approval is authorization for a plan amendment continuance on Cedar Falls Fire Lane and West Side Fire Lane, two originally proposed road segments for motorized use, and additional comments submitted from the Town of Little Rice outside of the comment period. During the public review process it became very apparent that access on and to the Cedar Falls and West Side Fire lanes is highly dependent on adjacent landowners and the existing roads are part of an interconnected regional snowmobile trail system. The Department is not recommending any changes to these two road segments at this time. However, the Department is requesting approval to continue discussions with private landowners, soliciting public comments on the options that emerge and a potential future NRB decision for any changes to motorized access on these road segments and, or any other road segment that may emerge due to public involvement. The continuance will also allow the Department an opportunity to review the effectiveness of the Iron Gate Road opening and propose any adjustments based on public feedback.

The fourth request is approval to address and proceed, as appropriate, with additional master plan amendment requests from the Town of Little Rice, submitted during the public comment period but outside of the scope of the current plan amendment process. Three of the requests can be addressed either through a master plan variance or administrative decision process, not requiring NRB approval. One of the requests is to re-name and re-designate the property, as well as land management objectives which would require NRB approval and is suggested to be addressed at the time of the next Master Plan revision. Comments submitted relating to motorized access will be address in the continuance request described above.

Public Involvement Process and Controversial issues

In May of 2013, the Department sought public comment on the scope of the amendment, current conditions and desires, known interests based on prior annual property meetings and a public involvement plan and the process and timeline for the plan amendment. In July of 2013, the Department shared for public comment a proposal, a preferred alternative, with alternatives considered. Information was shared on the Departments web site, sent to a stakeholders and interested person list, direct outreach to local units of governments and consultation with Tribes. Two public open house meetings and an online chat were held for the proposal. A summary and response to comments was developed and included.

For the NHAL amendment nearly all of the public comments were related to Van Vliet Hemlock block, expressing significant concern with the Departments proposal to conduct forest management on the northern portion of the block.

The Willow Flowage proposal received approximately 80 comments including diverse interests both for increased public motorized access and for maintaining current access levels. There were additional comments received from the Town of Little Rice during the comment period on topics not originally included in the proposed motorized access amendment which will be addressed outside of this approval request. Additional comments regarding access will be considered and included in the amendment continuance for Cedar Falls and West Side fire lanes and other access suggestions.

The Department recommends approval of:

- 1. NHAL Master Plan Amendment.**
- 2. Willow Flowage SWA Master Plan Amendment – Iron Gate Road.**
- 3. Willow Flowage SWA Master Plan Amendment Continuance.**
- 4. Approval on how to proceed with additional Master Plan Amendment Requests from the Town of Little Rice.**

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