Feasibility Study
and
Environmental Analysis
for the

CENTRAL WISCONSIN GRASSLAND CONSERVATION AREA

DRAFT

For public review and comment

A report to the Natural Resources Board
Proposed to be presented at their meeting in Park Falls
October 26-27, 2004

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Answers to some frequently asked questions.

What are a "Feasibility Study" and an "Environmental Analysis"?

A Feasibility Study is used to determine whether it is practicable for the Department to establish, acquire, develop, and manage a new property such as a State Park, Wildlife Area, Forest, or Natural Area. The Feasibility Study takes into account the area's physical and biological environment and its capabilities, the views of the public and landowners, and the availability of funding and staffing to successfully accomplish the project's purpose. Furthermore, a Feasibility Study presents a proposed boundary, alternatives, general land management strategies, and ensures that integrated ecosystem management principles are considered.

The Feasibility Study must also meet the requirements of the Wisconsin Environmental Policy Act (WEPA) and its implementing codes. Certain DNR actions require an Environmental Analysis or a complete Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Before the Department can implement the proposed project, it is required to complete an Environmental Analysis under NR 150 of Wisconsin's Administrative Code.

The Environmental Analysis process is used to evaluate the likely impacts of a very wide variety of proposed projects, ranging from building roads to landfills to transmission lines to golf courses. The Environmental Analysis also helps determine whether an activity's impacts will be significant enough to warrant a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Environmental Analysis document is meant to provide the public and decision-makers with a factual, unbiased analysis of a proposal, and must identify reasonable alternatives in order to help make an informed decision. Both the Environmental Analysis and Feasibility Study processes evaluate similar issues; thus, they are combined here into one document.

Obviously, some proposed projects have far greater impacts to the environment than others. Establishing new state properties or expanding existing ones is undertaken to protect or restore lands and waters important in meeting conservation and recreation needs. As a result, they do not result in the same type or level of environmental impact that is typically evaluated in an Environmental Analysis or Environmental Impact Statement process.

How is the Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area related to the Wisconsin Greater Prairie-Chicken Management and Recovery Plan?

The Department is proposing a new land protection project called the Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area (CWGCA). This project is designed to meet the needs of a wide range of grassland species, including the Greater Prairie-Chicken, as well as provide some low-impact recreation opportunities. The Department believes that if adequate grassland habitat can be protected to meet the needs of Greater Prairie-Chicken (GPC), that nearly all other grassland-dependent species in central Wisconsin will also benefit. As such, the goals, objectives, and boundary for the CWGCA are prominently centered around the life history needs of the GPC. However, the Department anticipates that some lands that may have modest value for the GPC may prove to be very important for other grassland species. Thus, the Wisconsin Greater Prairie-Chicken Management and Recovery Plan is a component of the CWGCA.

What is the approval process for these two plans?

Based on the feedback received during the public review period, the Department will summarize these comments and revise both documents as needed. These revised documents will then be forwarded, along with the summary of public comments, to the Natural Resources Board for their review and approval. The Department anticipates presenting both the Feasibility Study /Environmental Analysis for the CWGCA and the GPC Management and Recovery Plan to the Natural Resources Board at their October 26-27, 2004 meeting in Park Falls.

The public is invited to attend informal "open house" meetings where Department staff members will be available to answer questions and hear your input on the CWGCA. These meetings will be:

August 10: Wisconsin Rapids, at the McMillan Library (4:00 to 8:00PM)
August 11: Marshfield, at the Marshfield Public Library (4:00 to 8:00PM)

Where should I send comments?

You are invited to send your comments on this document to:
Jim Keir, Wildlife Biologist, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, PO Box 100, Friendship WI 53934-0100. Mr. Keir can be reached by phone at 608/339-4819 or e-mail at: keirj@dnr.state.wi.us.

Comments are due by August 27, 2004. If you comment on this plan and provide your mailing address, you will be sent a follow-up letter summarizing the comments received and the nature of any changes made based on these comments.

1. Executive Summary

The Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area stretches in an "S" shape from southeastern Taylor County, through parts of Clark and Marathon Counties, between Stevens Point and Wisconsin Rapids, and south to northeastern Adams County. Within this area, the Department proposes to protect up to 15,000 acres of grassland habitat over the next ten years. Based on continuing research on the habitat needs of many grassland species, the Department believes that maintaining significant amounts of open farmland in this area will be critically important in meeting these species' long-term conservation needs. As such, the Department also proposes to work with the farming community to help maintain farming as the dominant land use in the area. For administrative ease, the proposed project area is drawn along Township boundaries and includes 39 Townships. Within this overall boundary, the Department will be focusing its efforts in the occupied range of the Greater Prairie-Chicken (see Map 1).

Currently, several State Wildlife Areas and other protected lands nested within the Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area (CWGCA) are managed to benefit grassland-dependent species, particularly the Greater Prairie-Chicken (GPC). Despite the establishment of over 22,000 acres of permanent grassland habitat in this large project area, populations of the GPC and many other grassland-dependent species continue to decline here. Although a combination of factors is likely at work, it is believed that the population declines are primarily related to the loss and fragmentation of critical habitat and the shifting of farming operations to "higher-intensity" practices. In addition, there has been an increase in forest cover in the area, both a function of active planting and passive succession. The overall habitat fragmentation and loss has restricted the movement of GPCs and led to a loss in genetic diversity in the remaining population. As a result, the primary goal of the Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area is to improve the existing protected lands' ability to harbor viable populations of grassland-dependent species, particularly the GPC. To achieve this goal, the CWGCA's primary objectives are to:

(1) establish more permanent grassland habitat (primarily focused on lands within 1 mile of active, or recently active, GPC booming grounds), and
(2) maintain a predominantly open, unforested, undeveloped landscape where agriculture is the dominant land use, particularly in areas critical to the life history needs of grassland species.

A secondary goal of the project is, in collaboration with interested local governments and recreation providers, to provide limited, low-impact outdoor recreation opportunities compatible with grassland management.

A note about Farmers, Farming, and Farmland

Currently, much of the land within the CWGCA project area is farmed. It is likely that the success of the proposed project not only lies with protecting and restoring grassland habitat, but also in the future of agriculture here. Indeed, even if the Department and partners meet the goal of protecting 15,000 acres of grassland over the next 10 years, if most of the surrounding farmland is converted to forest or residential development then it is likely that populations of many grassland species will continue to decline. As such, a critical component of this project will be to work creatively with the farming community and organizations involved in farmland and grassland protection to develop agreements and easements that mutually benefit the economic health of farms and the ecological needs of grassland species.

2. Proposal

A. GOALS and OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of the Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area is to improve existing protected lands' ability to harbor viable populations of grassland-dependent species, particularly the GPC. To achieve this goal, the Department proposes to protect an additional 15,000 acres of grassland habitat in clusters that are set within a mix of farm fields. The overall size of these clusters will range in size. The Department proposes to establish four very large clusters (referred to as "Core Areas") encompassing approximately 10,000 acres of grasslands in blocks ranging from 40 to 1000 acres that are a close proximity to each other. Three of the four proposed large Core Areas are existing DNR Wildlife Areas. Between these Core Areas the Department proposes to establish up to ten smaller clusters (referred to as "Stepping Stone Areas") that comprise 500 acres of grassland in blocks of 40 to 160 acres. The intent of these smaller clusters is to facilitate movement of animals between the larger Core Areas. The Department proposes to concentrate its protection efforts on grassland habitat near current, or recently active, GPC booming grounds.

Buena Vista Grassland Wildlife Area provides an excellent example of this approach of integrating grassland habitat within a larger mosaic of land uses. The project boundary for this Wildlife Area (i.e., the boundary within which the Department is authorized to purchase lands from willing sellers) encompasses a very large area – about 47,000 acres. The Department currently owns about 7,800 acres within this boundary and manages an additional 4,400 acres (owned almost entirely by the Dane County Conservation League) in blocks of grassland habitat ranging from 40 to almost 2,000 acres. Much of the rest of the area is in agricultural production. Together, these lands provide exceptional habitat that meets the needs of nearly all grassland bird species found in central Wisconsin (including the largest GPC population remaining in the state). Based on the results of ongoing research on the habitat needs of grassland-dependent species, the Department believes that only a modest amount of additional grassland habitat is needed (1,000 to 2,000 acres) here *if other lands in the area remain predominantly in farming, including sufficient acreage of pasture and grass hay*.

Department properties within the CWGCA that are managed entirely or in part as grassland habitat include Leola, Buena Vista, Paul Olson, and George Mead State Wildlife Areas. Together, these properties form three of the four Core Areas. In addition to these properties, two other Wildlife Areas (McMillan and Dewey Marsh) and four State Fisheries Areas occur within the CWGCA, but are not managed as grassland habitat due to soil, hydrology, topography, and other constraints. Each of these properties has its own boundary, acquisition authority, and management goals. The CWGCA project does not propose changes to these management goals or their designation. For administrative purposes, the Department proposes to designate the area within the proposed project boundary that is outside of the existing state properties as a "habitat area." By Wisconsin law, "habitat areas" are intended to "enhance wildlife-based recreation in this state, including hunting, fishing, nature appreciation and the viewing of game and nongame species" (State Stats. 23.092(1)).

A secondary goal of the project is to provide a limited amount of low-impact recreation opportunities, primarily wildlife watching. The Department proposes to establish a regional segment of the Great Wisconsin Birding and Nature Trail and trails for non-motorized uses in the CWGCA that facilitate visitors' wildlife watching experience. Also of interest is the potential to expand viewing opportunities in the blinds set up to watch the GPC displays. Other outdoor recreation activities that are compatible with the conservation goals of the project could be considered in the future.

B. PROTECTION STRATEGIES

The Protection Approach

Many grassland-dependent species are most successful in large, open, unforested landscapes. Scattered housing and forest blocks, even relatively small blocks, in a grassland area can have significantly adverse impacts on the populations of grassland-dependent species. As such, within the CWGCA the Department seeks to protect four large grassland "**Core Areas**." Within these Core Areas, the Department will seek to ensure the permanent protection of approximately 25% of the area as permanent grasslands set in a mix of farm fields. Maintaining a substantial percentage of the farmland in pasture, hay, and row crops is preferable. Four large core areas are proposed within the CWGCA (see Map 1):

- BUENA VISTA -LEOLA GRASSLAND. These two Wildlife Areas harbor the greatest concentration of GPCs and short-eared owls remaining in Wisconsin, as well as healthy populations of the State-Threatened Henslow's sparrow and several other grassland bird species of management concern. Regal fritillary (State Endangered butterfly) and the Franklin ground squirrel (State Special Concern) also occur here. With almost 14,000 acres of grasslands already permanently protected and set within a predominantly farm-based landscape, Buena Vista-Leola is critical to the state's efforts to maintain grasslands in central Wisconsin.
- PAUL OLSON. Although this Wildlife Area has a large project boundary, very little permanent protection of grasslands has occurred here to date. The Department proposes to significantly increase the amount of permanently protected grasslands here over the next ten years.
- GEORGE MEAD. This very large Wildlife Area hosts diverse habitats including open and forested wetlands, upland grasslands, and mixed deciduous/coniferous forests. With over 7,000 acres of grasslands already permanently protected in its southern portion, Mead provides critical habitat for GPC and many other species. Important grasslands lie just to the south of the existing property boundary and if protected would very effectively compliment the grasslands at Mead.
- NORTHERN RANGE BOOMING GROUNDS. Northwest of McMillan Wildlife Area lie a series of unprotected GPC booming grounds that has been slowly diminishing in use over the last several decades. The Department proposes to establish a Core Area here centered on active, or recently used, booming grounds.

To facilitate the movement of grassland species (particularly the GPC) between these Core Areas, broad open landscapes dominated by agriculture are needed. Within these open corridors, the Department seeks to establish smaller "**Stepping Stone Areas**" that are also a mix of permanently protected grasslands nested within farmlands in a similar proportion to the Core Areas (~25% grasslands). The Department intends to center these Stepping Stone Areas primarily around concentrations of active booming grounds. Although these may vary somewhat in size and shape, they would generally be 2,000 to 3,000 acres (about 1 to 1½ mile radius). Over the next ten years, the Department proposes to establish one Stepping Stone Area between Leola and Buena Vista and up to three Stepping Stone Areas between each of the following: Buena Vista to Paul Olson, Paul Olson to George Mead, and George Mead to the Northern Booming Grounds.

Where these Stepping Stone Areas are eventually established within the corridors will also be a function of landowner interest, land use, parcel size, and land cover. That is, as grasslands are protected near clusters of booming grounds, a Stepping Stone Area will begin to form. The goal will be to "fill in" a Stepping Stone Area (i.e., reach the goal of protecting 25% of the area as grassland) rather than acquire a series of small parcels scattered throughout the corridors between the Core Areas.

Critical to the success of the CWGCA will be coordination among the many agencies and organizations that implement various programs centered on the protection of important farmlands and conservation lands. Representatives from county Land Conservation Departments, the Resource Conservation and Development Programs (particularly the Golden Sands RC&D), other NRCS programs, farm

organizations (WI Farm Bureau, Grass Works, and others), conservation organizations (Dane County Conservation League, the Society of *Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus*, Wisconsin Society of Ornithology, and others), and many other groups will need to integrate and coordinate efforts. The success of the CWGCA will depend on a cooperative effort among personnel from many agencies and organizations.

The proposed protection acreage goals for the Core Areas and Stepping Stone Areas are listed in Table 1. Readers should note that it is the intention of this project to purchase lands and/or land rights only where it fits the intent of the project and does not require a major outlay of funds and labor to achieve the desired open landscape approach. Department property managers and other resource individuals involved in acquisition will be keenly aware of this approach and communicate regularly.

Criteria for Identifying Critical Lands

The Department proposes to use the following criteria in determining which lands within the project area will be most effective at providing critical habitat for grassland-dependent species (and particularly the GPC). For all the criteria below, parcels that occur adjacent to concentrations of other grass cover will receive priority over parcels isolated from other grass cover. The criteria are:

a) Lands held in larger ownership parcels (preferably 80 acres or greater, unless they are critical in location or as habitat).
b) Lands within the Core Areas (described above) that are within one mile of active or recently used booming grounds and that are currently in grass cover.
c) Lands within the Core Areas that are within one mile of active or recently used booming grounds and that are currently in agriculture or other non-wooded use. The Department hopes to maintain these in pasture, hay, row crops, or as idle land.
d) Lands within the corridors between Leola, Buena Vista, Paul Olson, George Mead, and the Northern Booming Grounds that are within one mile of active or recently used booming grounds and that are currently in grass cover. Grasslands that are acquired under this criterion would form the foundation of a "Stepping Stone Area."
e) Lands within approximately one mile from the center of a "Stepping Stone Area" that are currently in agriculture or other non-wooded use. The Department hopes to maintain these in pasture, hay, row crops, or as idle land.
f) Parcels within the existing boundaries of Leola, Buena Vista, Paul Olson, George Mead and within the corridors between them that are strategically located relative to other protected lands.

The Department proposes to use the following criteria in determining which lands within the project area will be most effective at providing low-impact recreation opportunities that are compatible with grassland conservation:

a) Lands that if managed for low-impact recreation would not impede the management success of adjoining grasslands.
b) Lands held in larger ownership parcels (preferably 80 acres or greater, unless they are critical in location).
c) Lands adjacent to (or that could provide easy access to) the State Wildlife Areas within the CWGCA.

The Protection "Tools"

Natural resources can be protected in many ways. Some examples include:

(1) private landowners engaging in management actions that benefit native plants and animals,
(2) non-profit conservation organizations that work to protect specific types of lands and waters,
(3) local communities that enact zoning ordinances that maintain certain land uses in specific areas,
(4) local, state, and federal agencies that are authorized by the public, through their votes, to establish conservation programs and to purchase land.

The Department proposes to use a variety of techniques to protect land in the CWGCA. To the degree that staffing allows, the Department will continue to advise landowners on resource management options and practices. The Department will also continue to work with other state agencies to provide local units of government information on the locations of important lands and waters for their use as they develop comprehensive plans.

Department staff, in conjunction with local and federal agency staff, will also encourage landowner enrollment in various programs available through the federal "Farm Bill." The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and the new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) provide significant financial incentives to remove environmentally sensitive lands from agricultural production and restore perennial vegetation.

Because these programs can enroll lands for limited term (10 to 20 years) contracts, there is a constant flow of lands in and out of these programs. These Farm Bill programs are important ways to introduce landowners to conservation practices and can have significant conservation benefits while in existence. Lands enrolled in these programs provide substantial benefits to grassland species in central Wisconsin and Department staff will continue working with the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP), the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and Farm Services Agency (FSA) staff to facilitate and encourage landowner involvement in these programs. Although the administrators of these programs have no specific targets for the number of acres enrolled over the next ten years in the Central Grassland area, the DNR expects that potentially several thousand acres in the project area may be enrolled in CRP, CREP, GRP, and WRP by 2014. The CREP, WRP, and GRP offer landowners the ability to sell permanent easements on their land as well. Lands that are enrolled in permanent easements will be included in the Department's long-term protection goals.

For the CWGCA project to be successful in maintaining populations of grassland species, particularly the GPC, it will be critical for farming to be maintained as the dominant land use on the majority of lands in close proximity to the permanent grasslands that currently exist or become established. As such, the Department proposes to continue working with the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the county Land and Water Conservation Departments, and other farm groups to identify mechanisms and funding sources that keep critical agricultural lands in farming. **Maintaining productive farmlands in the CWGCA is critical to the project's long-term success.**

The Department currently enters into agreements with local farmers to graze, hay, and/or crop public and private conservation lands at Buena Vista, Leola, Paul Olson, and George Mead. For example, at Buena Vista and Leola, nearly 3,000 acres of land are part of rotational grazing agreements that enable local farmers to graze cattle for one or two years in different pastures. Another 2,000 acres are part of a farming rotation that moves land through two years of corn, three years of hay, and then eleven years of undisturbed grass. These arrangements have proven to be very beneficial to GPC and local farmers. Similar types of farming agreements are in use at George Mead as well. The Department is interested in expanding this "grassland/farmland" concept, both in terms of acres enrolled and the types of farming arrangements.

One additional option currently being evaluated would be to establish ten-year agreements that enable farmers to hay, crop, or graze public land (or land on which the DNR purchases an easement) for any three consecutive years out of every ten. In this form of agreement, the farmer could determine what commodity to produce and when, based on their needs and market conditions. During the other seven years, the land would be maintained as open grassland.

In addition to a variety of farming agreements on public land, the Department anticipates pursuing the acquisition of different types of easements. In some cases, the Department will seek to purchase conservation easements that permanently establish grassland habitat while keeping land in private ownership. The Department also will attempt to purchase the development rights on some lands, an approach that will not only keep the land in private ownership, but also enable the land to be farmed continually.

C. POTENTIAL SIZE

The Department believes that permanently protecting 50,000 acres of grassland habitat within the CWGCA will meet the life history needs of most, if not all, grassland-dependent species found in the central part of the state. The Department proposes to approach this target with an initial goal of establishing and permanently protecting 15,000 acres of grassland habitat over the next ten years. Combined with the existing 22,000 acres of already protected grassland habitat currently in the project area, a total of 37,000 acres of permanent grassland would comprise just over 4% of the total project area.

D. PARTNERS

Over the past many decades, private and public organizations have invested considerable sums of money and countless hours protecting, restoring, and maintaining critical grassland habitat in central Wisconsin. Of particular note are the Dane County Conservation League and the Society of *Tympanuchus Cupido Pinnatus*. Both groups championed Fran and Fred Hammerstrom's call for measures to save the dwindling GPC populations and played critical roles in actively raising funds and protecting land in the 1950s and 1960s. Without their dedication and perseverance, there would likely be few, if any, Greater Prairie-Chicken populations left to be protected in Wisconsin.

Other groups that have played integral roles in GPC conservation and/or will continue to be critical to future success include: the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, Aldo Leopold Chapter of the Audubon Society, the County Land Conservation Departments, the Golden Sands Resource Conservation & Development Council, the Farm Services Agency, two active Drainage Districts, the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, UW-Stevens Point, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Town governments.

A "silent" partner in grassland habitat protection that deserves recognition is the large number of farmers in the CWGCA. These stewards of the land have played *the* critical role in providing habitat for grassland species through their various management practices over the years. Although many farmers may not be aware of the positive influence their day-to-day activities have had on grassland species, it is clear that without their actions, the number, diversity and distribution of grassland species in the CWGCA would be dramatically reduced. It is their use of the land that has resulted in the values that the CWGCA seeks to protect.

E. MANAGEMENT GOALS

When the Department is authorized to purchase properties within a project area, it develops a comprehensive plan for how lands will be managed, for what purposes, the target habitat conditions, what improvements are planned and where (e.g., campsites, dikes, parking lots, buildings, etc.) and other issues associated with property management. Although the Department attempts to review and update these documents, often referred to as "Master Plans," about every ten years, all the plans for the state properties located within the CWGCA are at least 15 years old and will benefit from revision. Ideally, in the near future the Department will have the resources to develop one simplified and coordinated document that combines the land management and facilities planning for all state-owned lands within the CWGCA.

Lands that are purchased or eased will be managed using a wide variety of management techniques. It will be a priority, though, to manage lands in a way that will both provide necessary landscape habitat

components and require a minimum of direct maintenance activity. The approach used on individual parcels will vary due to soils, topography, hydrology, and cover type. Until a coordinated management plan is drafted, the Department will generally seek to manage lands it acquires (or assumes management responsibilities for) within the CWGCA --that are outside of the existing State Wildlife Areas-- as follows:

Grassland Habitat:
Lands purchased by the Department will primarily be managed as permanent grass cover with some portions rented or leased to local farmers for periodic cropping or grazing. Most parcels that are eased, will allow and encourage the landowner to continue farming the land on at least a periodic basis.

Options currently available to managers will be tailored to individual parcels or clusters of parcels and be designed to fit into the local agricultural community. The management goal will be to maintain a mixed grassland agricultural landscape that minimizes brush and tree encroachment. Management options available are as follows:

- Planting of native grassland species
- Planting of cool season grasses and legumes
- Cropping on a permanent or rotational basis. Crop rotations will generally consist of the typical corn, oats, hay rotation.
- Grazing
- Prescribed burning
- Mowing operations
- Herbicide application

Wetland enhancements:
Within a grassland landscape, the addition or restoration of wetlands is an extremely compatible approach that will be an integral part of the proposed project. Grasslands adjacent to wetlands provide critical foraging and nesting habitat for many wetland species. The potential for wetland enhancement or development will vary between parcels that are acquired or eased. Wetland development and restoration techniques will also very greatly between parcels, groups of parcels, and areas within the grassland landscape. Options available will depend on soils, topography, and hydrology and consist of the following:

- Wetland scrapes
- Diked drainages
- Ditch plugs

Recreational Developments:
Lands acquired through this project will provide some opportunity for compatible recreational activities. Decisions evaluating potential locations for parking lots, trails, and other developments will be undertaken and addressed through the master planning process. In that process, local input will be critical, as well as information on recreational demand, proximity to similar or other developments, design, projected use, and affect on priority habitats.

3. Need

A. CONSERVATION

The Greater Prairie-Chicken and many other grassland-dependent species have declined dramatically throughout North America over the past fifty years. In Wisconsin, numerous inventories and studies have documented the decline of prairie and savanna plants and animals. Concern has been voiced for decades by botanists, lepidopterists, and maybe most prominently by ornithologists, about the need to actively conserve grassland-dependent species. In 1997, the Department published a definitive report on the subject, *Managing Habitat for Grassland Birds: A guide for Wisconsin*.

Although various factors may play into the population declines that many grassland species have experienced, it appears that loss of breeding habitat is a primary cause. As stated in *Managing Habitat for Grassland Birds,*

> "Native grasslands have been almost completely lost since European settlement, and agricultural land has undergone many changes, from the era of wheat farming in the late 1800s, to the dominance of dairy farming in the mid-1900s, to the growth of row cropping in recent decades. Some bird species adapted well to agricultural land use in the early to mid-1900s, but since the late 1950s large acreages of pasture and small grain crops have been converted to row crops, which decreased useable agricultural habitat for grassland bird species. Also, much late-harvested grass hay has been converted to alfalfa, which is harvested early and frequently, causing significant mortality of nesting birds. The loss of hay and pasture acreage is strongly correlated with declines in grassland bird populations in the Midwest." (pg. 4)

Landscapes where agriculture is still low-intensity and where grass (e.g., pasture, old field, and idle grass fields enrolled in federal set-aside programs) and small grains comprises a significant part of the landscape still harbor healthy populations of many grassland bird species. In landscapes such as these, many grassland birds can maintain themselves with scattered grassland parcels in the size range of 40 to 250 acres.

However, some grassland bird species of management concern in the state are area sensitive, meaning they require still larger blocks of grassland habitats to maintain viable populations. Some species, such as the GPC, require landscapes of at least 10,000 acres, where there is a large core of permanent grassland habitat (ideally, 2,000 acres), and where the surrounding land use includes a mix of blocks of permanent and long-term grass cover and agricultural fields. Other species can do well with similarly structured landscapes in the 1,000 to 5,000-acre range.

Research indicates that successfully protecting populations (large enough to be self-sustaining over a long period of time) of a variety of different grassland species will require a multi-pronged approach towards habitat protection. One of the most challenging components will be protecting large, landscape-scale areas that harbor area-sensitive species in a dynamic mosaic. Given climate, soils, land use, land ownership trends, and a host of other factors, opportunities to protect and manage large-scale grassland landscapes in Wisconsin are limited. The Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area offers one of the few realistic opportunities to protect large, functioning grassland complexes. Other important landscapes include the Crex Meadows/Fish Lake area, Western Prairie HRA, Glacial HRA, and Pecatonica, Blue Mounds, and Monroe areas. Each of these landscapes contains, to varying degrees, portions of the original grassland ecosystem in Wisconsin.

The existing State Wildlife Areas within the CWGCA are the foundations on which this larger project is proposed. To be sure, these large properties harbor critical habitat for grassland species. Yet, as our understanding of life histories, viable population sizes, and other factors has increased, there is growing

realization that the collection of protected lands in the central grasslands does not provide enough habitat to sustain adequate population sizes of many species, most notably, the GPC. The area encompassing the GPC population in the central part of the state continues to contract, particularly in the northern portion of the range.

A corollary problem for GPC appears to be that the areas harboring populations are disjunct and are likely too far apart to facilitate movement of GPC from one area to another. As a result, remaining GPC populations in the central grassland have become more and more "genetically isolated" and now have considerably less genetic diversity than GPC populations in other states.

B. RECREATION

The existing State Wildlife Areas within the CWGCA allow a limited range of uses, primarily hunting and wildlife watching. Because the public lands within these Wildlife Areas were acquired in part using federal money generated from the sale of firearms and ammunition (popularly called the Pittman-Robertson fund), these properties cannot be used for activities that would substantively detract from wildlife use of the property.

The GPC's elaborate mating display combines stomping feet, dancing, whoops and cackles as males stake out territory. Special blinds have been erected at Buena Vista that provide visitors close up views of this remarkable annual event. Each spring, hundreds of bird watchers from around the state and country flock to Central Wisconsin to enjoy the early morning show. The CWGCA provides an opportunity to expand the viewing opportunities and draw in more visitors to the area.

4. Context

A. PROPERTY PERSPECTIVE

The Lands and Waters

The Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area straddles the boundary between the Central Sand Plains and the Forest Transition ecological landscapes (see Map 2). The southeastern portion falls within the Central Sand Plains and is characterized by flat, sandy soils. Much of this area historically was a mix of marsh, prairie, and savanna. In the early 1900s, draining and ditching transformed large areas into pasture, grass seed fields and cropland. The northern and western portions of the CWGCA have loamier soils, are slightly higher, and harbor more topography. As the name implies, the Forest Transition Ecological Landscape marks the beginning of the "northern forest" and historically this area was dominated by maple, hemlock, tamarack, and pine. Following logging in the late 1800s, much of the uplands were converted to agriculture, initially in wheat and later in dairy farming.

Much of the area within the CWGCA remains in agricultural production, with shifts over the last 40 years to an increase in row crops (with more and more based on center pivot irrigation) and a decrease in pasture land and small grains. Cranberry beds are being created in a number of areas. In addition, there has been an increase in forest cover here, in part due to tree planting and also due to natural succession as woody growth becomes established in former farm fields. Rural residential development is spreading through portions of the area, fed by the population growth in Stevens Point, Wausau, Marshfield, and Wisconsin Rapids.

Due to the size, quality and distribution of the existing public and private grasslands, this area is particularly attractive to a diverse community of grassland birds. The state's largest populations of GPC, short-eared owl, and possibly Henslow's sparrow are found here. A great diversity of other declining or rare grassland birds, including sedge wren, Wilson's phalarope, blue-winged teal, bobolink, upland

sandpiper, Brewer's blackbird, Eastern and Western meadowlarks, northern harrier, and several rare sparrows (including grasshopper, field, and clay-colored) are found locally. In addition, the regal fritillary butterfly, a State-Endangered species, is common at Buena Vista Grasslands.

The People
Relative to the rest of the state, this area has experienced only moderate population growth. Yet, land use is changing here as rural residential development has spread and agricultural practices have changed. The two largest cities in the project area, Stevens Point and Wisconsin Rapids, sit on the Wisconsin River. Their populations have slowly climbed over the last 20 years and in 2000 stood at 24,551 and 18,435, respectively. Over the next 25 years, Stevens Point is projected to grow nearly 9% while Wisconsin Rapids is projected to lose 4% of its population. As a comparison, the state's population is expected to grow about 17% by 2025.

B. REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE
The dominant feature in the Central Sand Plains ecological landscape is the vast, remarkably flat, sandy plain that was once the bed of Glacial Lake Wisconsin —the enormous body of water fed primarily by glacial runoff. This lake, ringed by the Driftless Area to the southwest and the glacier to the north and east, was 70 to 150 feet deep and covered over 1,800 square miles. Streams and rivers draining from the glacier into the lake carried enormous loads of sand, silt, and clay that settled onto the lake bottom. The historic vegetation of the area included extensive wetlands of many types, including open bogs, shrub swamps, and sedge meadows. Significant acreages of prairies, oak forests, savannas and barrens also occurred in the Central Sand Plains. Much of this area was subject to frequent, and likely wide-ranging, fires.

Today, nearly half of the Central Sand Plains ecological landscape is nonforested, in agriculture and grassland. Most of the historic wetlands were drained early in the 1900s and are now used for vegetable cropping. The forested portion is mostly oak-dominated forest, followed by aspen and pines. A minor portion is maple-basswood forest and lowland hardwoods.

The Forest Transition ecological landscape was historically almost entirely covered with mesic to wet-mesic forests of hemlock and sugar maple, with some yellow birch, red pine, and white pine. There were pockets of conifer swamps, often near the headwaters of streams, containing white cedar, black spruce and tamarack. With a combination of productive soils and more moderate climate, this band across the state marks the northern extent of predominantly agricultural land use. Remaining forests tend to occur as fragments and are often quite small. Soils are diverse and range from sandy loam to loam and shallow silt loam (both poorly drained and well drained).

Like much of the rest of the state, land uses in the overall region are changing, in some cases dramatically. Agriculture is the dominant land use and likely will continue to be so in the foreseeable future. Although the majority of land in the region may remain in agriculture, the nature of how land is used here is changing. Agriculture as an industry is evolving towards a dichotomous ownership pattern. On one hand is an increase in the number of small (less that 100 acres) farms, many with farm sales of less than $10,000/year. At the other end of the spectrum has been the significant increase in the number of very large farms (over 500 acres). Much of this growth is driven by attempts to achieve economies of scale in dairy and vegetable (potato) farming.

With this change in farm ownership patterns has come changes to farm practices. Fifty years ago, much of the region was dominated by 100 to 200-acre farms that combined row crops with pasture, hay, and small grains. Now, many of the small farms have limited hay, small grains and pasture, with increasing amounts of housing and woodlots. The large farms now tend to rely extensively on large center pivot irrigation operations that provide little benefit to grassland species. In addition, many farms use

increasingly effective herbicides and pesticides to increase crop production. Unfortunately for grassland birds, this also results in fewer weed seeds and insects on which to opportunistically forage.

Also like much of the rest of the state, residential housing on large lots (often from 2 to 20 acres) is spreading through portions of the CWGCA. In many cases, land surrounding these houses is converted from agricultural use to residential landscaping, which provides little useable habitat for most grassland species. The development pressure is stronger west of the Wisconsin River where the terrain is more rolling.

5. Costs

A. ACQUISITION COSTS

Land values vary within the CWGCA. As a general range, land parcels between 80 and 160 acres currently sell for $1,100 to $1,450/acre. Over the next 10 years, they will most likely range from $1,100/acre to $2,000+/acre. Larger parcels tend to be less expensive on a per acre basis, sometimes significantly. If the Department were to achieve its goal of acquiring 15,000 acres over the next 10 years, these costs are estimated to be approximately $20,000,000 to $30,000,000 ($2 to $3 million/year).

At this time it remains unknown if, and how, farmland protection measures may develop and what types of programs would be attractive for farmers. As such, no attempt is made here to estimate how many acres may be protected through a farmland protection program or the associated costs.

B. LAND MANAGEMENT COSTS

As has been stated before, one of the Department's overarching goals is to work with the agriculture community to maintain farming, especially lower-intensity farming operations, as the dominant land use in the CWGCA. The Department proposes to enter into agreements with local farmers to periodically crop, hay, and/or graze significant amounts of lands the Department owns, eases or may own or ease in the future. The Department hopes this approach will both help improve the financial standing of local farmers and minimize the Department's cost of land management. The Department also will minimize management costs by clustering permanent grassland parcels for which it assumes management responsibility.

Based on current costs, the Department estimates that if all 15,000 acres of the proposed project were acquired, management costs (including staff and materials) for lands within the CWGCA, but outside of the existing State Wildlife Areas, would fall between $50,000 and $75,000/year (in current dollars).

C. RECREATION DEVELOPMENT COSTS

Recreation facilities as currently proposed will be limited and low-intensity, and as such are likely to require only modest staff time and money to develop and operate. Nonetheless, the Department will need to find and allocate sufficient resources for the construction and operation of recreation facilities in order for these facilities to successfully provide satisfying outdoor recreation opportunities. It is estimated that approximately $1,500 to $2,500/year will be needed to construct and maintain parking lots, trails, and signs over the next ten years.

IMPACTS ON PROPERTY TAXES

Many local citizens are concerned that if the Department of Natural Resources purchases property in their area the amount of land subject to property tax will be reduced and, as a result, remaining property owners will receive higher tax bills. Prior to 1992, the state made payments to local governments where the Department owned land based on a rather complicated formula. Due to the confusion surrounding these payments, often referred to as "payments in lieu of taxes" or PILT, the legislature created a new law in 1992 that simplified the payment process.

The Department of Natural Resources now pays aids in lieu of taxes ***equal*** *to property taxes that would have been paid had the land remained in private ownership*. According to the new law (State Statute 70.11 (1)), property acquired by DNR comes off the tax roll and in place of the loss of tax base, each taxing jurisdiction receives an aid payment equivalent to property taxes.

The only difference between the way that DNR makes its payments in lieu of taxes and what a private landowner would relates to the way in which assessed value is determined. As you may know, in almost all cases the DNR can only purchase property for its appraised fair market value, as determined by two independent appraisals. This insures that landowners are offered a fair and competitive price and that taxpayers (as the ultimate buyers) pay only what a property is worth.

To avoid the need for local assessors to continually assess DNR property and for the DNR to review and possibly appeal assessments, the law states that initial assessed value is set at the DNR purchase price of the property. Subsequently, this value is adjusted to reflect the change in the assessed value of land in the taxation district. For example, if the assessed value of land in a Township increases by 5%, then the assessed value of DNR land in the Township is automatically increased 5% and the payment in lieu of taxes also increases 5%. All other aspects of the way DNR makes its payment in lieu of tax under this new program are the same as those for a local taxpayer.

6. Discussion & Evaluation

A. FROM A LAND PROTECTION PERSPECTIVE

Land in this part of the state is increasing in value, but not nearly as rapidly as other areas of the state where grassland restoration is underway. For example, lands within the Western Prairie HRA and the Blue Mound-Blanchardville Prairie and Savanna Area, two very high quality sites for restoring large grassland complexes, are significantly more expensive as land in the CWGCA. This is largely due to their proximities to the Twin Cities and Madison, respectively.

The proposed project also presents the opportunity to leverage the compatibility of grassland conservation and farming. Clearly, many types of farming practices are compatible, indeed they will be instrumental, with the Department's ability to meet the CWGCA conservation and recreation goals. Similarly, because much of the land the Department acquires (either in fee simple or specific rights within) will be farmed periodically, the project will benefit and complement farming in the area.

Funding sources to acquire land and land rights are expected to come from a variety of sources, both public and private. The federal farm bill programs are expected to continue for the foreseeable future. The state's Stewardship program is authorized through 2010 and with the potential to be continued. Non-profit conservation groups have long been active players in protecting lands for the GPC and other grassland species in central Wisconsin and it is expected that they will continue to expend resources here.

B. FROM A CONSERVATION PERSPECTIVE

The CWGCA received very high rankings in both recreational and conservation value in the Land Legacy Report. Due to the size, quality and distribution of the existing grasslands, the DNR's publication *Managing Habitat for Grassland Birds: A guide for Wisconsin* ranked the CWGCA in the top five areas for grassland bird conservation in the state. The state's largest populations of GPC, short-eared owl, and regal fritillary butterflies are found here. Other declining or rare grassland birds, including Henslow's, upland sandpiper, Eastern and Western meadowlarks, northern harrier, and several rare sparrows are found locally. Given the land base of protected grasslands in this area and the established farm economy, there is a high likelihood that the CWGCA will be successful in meeting its conservation goals.

The Department has a long history of successfully restoring, creating, and managing a variety of habitat conditions around the state. The Wildlife Program in particular has been adept at working with the public to establish and manage wildlife areas to meet conservation and recreation demands in nearly every county in the state. Over the next decade, the Department believes that it will be able to continue this success here in the CWGCA and will be able to acquire up to 15,000 acres from willing sellers and maintain these lands as grassland habitat. As such, it is believed that the biggest challenges to the success of this proposed project won't be protecting grassland habitat, but rather will be maintaining the open, predominantly unforested, undeveloped aspect of the agricultural landscape within which the grassland habitat will sit.

To be successful, this effort will require a coordinated approach involving many agencies that are working with local landowners, particularly the local farm community. These agencies have a wide variety of programs to offer the landowner, and many produce results on the landscape that provide the benefits sought within the CWGCA.

If the Department is unable to achieve the goal of maintaining an open, mostly unforested landscape dominated by farming on significant portions within the CWGCA, then it is likely that GPC populations will continue to decline. Although many other grassland species may maintain viable, self-sustaining populations on the grasslands that the Department manages, the GPC is dependent on very large, open landscapes. As a result, if the Department is not successful working with the farming community in maintaining a mosaic of farms and grasslands in the "Core Areas" and the "Stepping Stone Areas," then it is possible that the project's goal of protecting a self-sustaining GPC population in central Wisconsin will not be met.

Managing and maintaining grasslands on this (or any) landscape in the future will be more difficult as the number of agency staff are reduced and money available for management is reduced. The CWGCA will rely extensively on conservation easements and farming agreements to rotate land through cycles of agricultural use (either grazing, haying, or cropping) and idle grassland. This approach will provide a major management tool in maintaining grasslands on CWGCA.

C. FROM A RECREATION PERSPECTIVE

There is growing demand throughout the state for opportunities to engage in many forms of outdoor, nature-based recreation, particularly relatively close to where people live. Several cities are within the project area, notably Stevens Point and Wisconsin Rapids, and others are nearby. Yet, the state's largest

population centers are a two-hour drive from the area. Many travelers from the Milwaukee metropolitan area, Madison, and Green Bay often bypass the central part of the state and choose to head further north to the forest and lakes area where large public properties combined with a diverse environment provide many recreation opportunities.

As stated earlier, another obstacle to providing satisfying recreation opportunities here is that the project is designed to protect lands in a clustered approach, but not necessarily in a contiguous pattern. Although the Department will attempt to strategically connect parcels when possible, providing longer trail uses will be difficult. Finally, although large grasslands have a unique aesthetic value, they traditionally have not drawn visitors in the numbers or frequencies that large forests or open waters have in this state. For the very flat landscape that comprises much of the south and eastern portion of the CWGCA, this is particularly true.

Lands within the project are likely to successfully provide both good hunting opportunities for deer and turkey as well as excellent bird watching opportunities. The newly established Great Wisconsin Birding and Nature Trail plans to establish a segment here in 2006, called the Central Sand Prairie Birding and Nature Trail.

In sum, although it appears the CWGCA could provide some low-impact recreation opportunities, it likely has only a small role in helping meet the state's growing demand for outdoor recreation.

7. Alternatives considered, but not selected

A. NO CHANGE FROM CURRENT PROTECTION APPROACH

For each state property (Wildlife Area, Forest, Park, etc.) the Department is authorized by the Natural Resources Board and the Governor to attempt to purchase a set amount of land within a specific boundary. This alternative would have the Department continue its already approved protection efforts and would not authorize any additional efforts. The Department would continue purchasing lands only within existing property boundaries and only up to their respective authorized goals. These boundary sizes, authorized goals, and acres protected to date are as follows:

Property Name	Existing boundary size	Existing authorized goal	Acres already protected	Number of acres until goal is met
Leola	8,200 acres	1,860 acres	1,860 acres	0 acres
Buena Vista	47,000 acres	14,000 acres	12,000 acres	2,000 acres
George Mead	31,800 acres	31,800 acres	29,800 acres	2,000 acres
Paul Olson	22,000 acres	2,000 acres	2,000 acres	0 acres

This alternative would not address the critical need for protection of a large grassland landscape to secure habitat for existing grassland species found in this area. If current trends continue, grassland acreage will likely continue to shrink, more habitat fragmentation will occur and grassland dependent species will dwindle and perhaps be locally extirpated. Species requiring relatively large tracts of grassland, such as the Greater Prairie-Chicken, are particularly susceptible to these types of land use changes and will likely be among the first species most impacted.

This alternative was not chosen because this area of the state is believed to be the best opportunity to secure large-scale habitat for grassland dependent species. The importance of the area is underscored by the presence of the only remaining GPC in the Wisconsin. The range of the GPC continues to shrink and is an indication of the need for action.

B. BLOCK IN OWNERSHIP WITHIN EXISTING PROPERTY BOUNDARIES
This alternative would have the Department attempt to purchase all available lands within the existing Wildlife Areas (Leola, Buena Vista, Olson, Mead) and convert these lands to open grassland.

This alternative would enable the Department to build a portfolio of very large blocks of contiguous grasslands. This alternative would likely reduce land management costs on a per-acre basis and would provide greater flexibility and variety in the types of recreation opportunities these lands could accommodate. This alternative would substantially increase the acquisition costs of the project.

This alternative would provide less overall useable habitat because there would be far less farmland near and adjacent to the protected grasslands. This alternative would also likely require the Department to incur substantial additional expense keeping lands open for GPC use.

This alternative was not selected because research indicates that the most effective approach to meet the habitat needs of grassland species is to provide a range of protected places – some very large, others smaller and more scattered – within a mosaic of open lands. By working only to establish large contiguous blocks of grassland, far less total useable habitat would be protected.

C. FOCUS ONLY ON ESTABLISHING GRASSLANDS; DO NOT INCORPORATE FARMLAND PROTECTION
This alternative would have the Department focus its efforts solely on protecting and restoring grasslands and would not include farmland protection as an overall goal of the project. The Department would not take active steps to work with local farming interests and would not seek to enter into farming agreements with local farmers that would provide grazing, haying, or cropping opportunities on public and private conservation land.

This option would significantly increase the Department's cost of land management due to the lack of farming practices that would help keep lands open. This option would also have a greater impact on the local farm economy by not providing use of some fields for grazing, haying, or cropping. This in turn may lead more farms and farmers to be less economically successful.

This alternative was not selected because of the increased costs to the Department and the reduced value to local farmers. In addition, this option would not allow for a coordinated effort with other agencies that currently have the potential to provide similar benefits through already existing programs for private landowners. Most importantly, if farmland is not maintained and protected in the CWGCA, then the grasslands that are protected will have greatly diminished value for most grassland species.

D. EXPANSION OF EXISTING PROJECTS
This alternative would expand existing boundaries of the State Wildlife Areas to include large tracts that could be converted to grassland. It would require blocking in areas large enough to provide contiguous grassland within each project to secure grassland species. This alternative, as a series of projects with acquisition goals that block in boundaries, would have advantages in simplicity of administration and management.

This alternative may not provide opportunities to secure some of the better grassland habitat in the area. Unless the expansions were extremely large it would not prevent the habitat fragmentation that is creating a problem for some grassland species. Blocking in large project expansions may actually require a greater amount of fee acquisition and therefore be more expensive. Progress on securing grasslands will likely be slower as only willing sellers within project boundaries will be eligible for land acquisition.

This alternative was not chosen because it would not meet the habitat needs of some grassland species (particularly GPC and other species dependent on expansive grasslands). This alternative may be more expensive from an acquisition standpoint and would not provide the flexibility to secure the best tracts for grassland while taking advantage of surrounding farmland to provide the open landscapes required of some grassland species.

E. OTHER PROJECT LOCATIONS

This alternative considered other locations in the state for a similar project to meet the habitat requirements of grassland species, including the GPC. Other areas of the state harbored prairies at the time of Euro-American settlement and could be restored relatively easily if land was secured. Once established as grassland, the soils and climate conditions would likely be very conducive to long-term grassland management. Unfortunately, nearly all the native prairie in the state has been converted to farmland and very little is in protected ownership. As a result, establishing a new project to provide large-scale grassland habitat will be very challenging.

Although much of the land within the proposed CWGCA historically was a mix of wetlands, barrens, and forest, currently it harbors the largest public land base managed for grassland and within an open, unforested landscape. As a result, although many of the existing grasslands in the proposed CWGCA are not native, they provide critical habitat for many species. It will be very important for the Department and its partners to also protect grasslands (and native prairies) in other areas of the state to ensure that the diversity of prairie species is maintained in Wisconsin.

This alternative was not selected because, based on current land use and the distribution of public lands in the state, the CWGCA provides the most efficient opportunity to protect a very large-scale grassland mosaic in an open landscape.

8. Environmental Effects

A. ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

The environmental impacts associated with the proposed acquisition of land and/or land rights by the Department or partner groups are positive. Increased protection of permanent grassland habitat and efforts to maintain farming within the CWGCA would substantially improve the long-term outlook for populations of rare and declining grassland species in central Wisconsin. These protected lands also offer the potential to provide additional nature-based outdoor recreational opportunities.

The habitat development activities described previously in 2E (cropping, prescribed burns, herbicide treatments, brushing, etc.) are often temporarily disruptive to wildlife, either through direct change of habitat conditions or reductions to populations of some species. However, these management actions improve the quality of the habitat over the long term and are critical to maintaining grassland species in the central part of the state. Permanent grassland sod helps mitigate and prevent wind erosion, which is an ongoing concern in the central sand region, and protects water resources by reducing surface water runoff. Soil erosion would be minimized to the extent possible because of the use of best management practices by the DNR. It is likely that some wetlands will be restored within the CWGCA and no adverse impacts to existing wetlands are anticipated.

The proposed project is not expected to appreciably add to increased traffic or human disturbance to the natural environment. Use levels would increase, but because they would likely occur over much of the year, the risk of sharp increases occurring from one month to the next would be minimized. Although there will be some uses by the public other than hunting, trapping, and wildlife watching, they will be

slight by comparison. Hunting will occur throughout much of the year, but peak during the fall deer, grouse, pheasant seasons (September, October and November) and the spring turkey season (April and May). Wildlife watching will likely peak during the spring and fall periods.

Some cropland would be removed from production and converted to grassland vegetation eliminating the income-producing abilities of the associated farm. The financial impact would be partially offset by the selling price. Efforts to protect grasslands and maintain farmland are expected to have modest, if any, impacts to land values in the overall project area.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

The acquisition of these land and/or land rights by the Department or partner groups would protect additional wildlife habitat and provide additional recreation opportunities. The Department and its partners will manage lands that are acquired, eased, or leased to benefit grassland species. Although a variety of techniques will be used (including enabling local farmers to periodically graze, hay, and crop some of these lands), the overall goal will be to maintain the open aspect of the area. While some conversion of agricultural lands to grassland would occur, a substantial amount of these lands would be available for cropping, haying, and/or grazing on a periodic basis. It is the Department's intent that the proposed CWGCA will improve the economic viability of grass-based agricultural operations in the area and not have an adverse cumulative impact on the local farm economy.

Given the state's climate, soils, topography, and other factors, few places in Wisconsin supported large-scale prairie habitats prior to Euro-American settlement. As such, there are few places where a project like the CWGCA could be proposed. Other large, predominantly grassland landscapes include the Crex Meadows/Fish Lake area, Western Prairie HRA, Glacial HRA, and Pecatonica, Blue Mounds, and Monroe areas. The Department already has established projects at the first three of these and is in the early stages of proposing a similar "grassland conservation area" in the vicinity of Blue Mounds. As such, there is little opportunity in Wisconsin to significantly impact the human environment through the cumulative establishment of a large number of grassland conservation projects.

C. SIGNIFICANCE OF RISK

There is little or no environmental risk associated with the proposed purchase of land or land rights by the Department or its subsequent management. Until completion of a management plan (Master Plan), prior to undertaking individual management activities that would cause significant land disturbance, DNR staff would check for any environmental risks. In addition, staff would consult both the Natural Heritage Inventory for the known presence or Endangered, Threatened, or Special Concern species and the Historical Society database on historic and cultural resources.

D. SIGNIFICANCE OF PRECEDENT

The proposed land acquisition and management are not precedent setting. The Department has purchased and managed other wildlife habitat land in this vicinity. The Department has undertaken large-scale conservation projects in the recent past that integrate habitat protection within a mosaic of complimentary land uses. Some examples include the Lower Wolf River Bottomlands Natural Resource Area, the Western Prairie Habitat Restoration Area, and the North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area.

The proposed agricultural agreements would constitute a major increase in the Department's efforts to work collaboratively with the farming community. The Department has been engaged in farming agreements at Buena Vista, Leola, and Paul Olson, but the proposed CWGCA project could significantly expand the number of agreements.

E. SIGNIFICANCE OF CONTROVERSY
Little controversy has surfaced regarding the goals and objectives of the other Wildlife Areas in the project area. Over the past 25 years the Department has had a successful relationship with area landowners. Little controversy is anticipated for the proposed project.

9. Public Involvement

In this section, we will describe how the public has been involved with the review of the proposed project, their reaction to the proposal, what issues were consistently raised by the public and how were they addressed.

10. Feasibility Determination

To be determined, based on review and input from the public.

11. Environmental Analysis Decision

Project Name: Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area **County**: Taylor, Clark, Marathon, Wood, Portage, Adams

DECISION (This decision is not final until certified by the appropriate authority)

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

Complete either A or B below:

A. EIS Process Not Required ☐

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 which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment. In my opinion, therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required prior to final action by the Department.

B. Major Action Requiring the Full EIS Process ☐

The proposal is of such magnitude and complexity with such considerable and important impacts on the quality of the human environment that it constitutes a major action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.

Signature of Evaluator	Date Signed

Number of responses to news release or other notice:

Certified to be in compliance with WEPA	
Environmental Analysis and Liaison Program Staff	Date Signed

NOTICE OF APPEAL RIGHTS

If you believe that you have a right to challenge this decision, you should know that 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, 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 shall name the Department of Natural Resources as the respondent.

To request a contested case hearing pursuant to section 227.42, 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. The filing of a request for a contested case hearing is not a prerequisite for judicial review and does not extend the 30-day period for filing a petition for judicial review.

Note: Not all Department decisions respecting environmental impact, such as those involving solid waste or hazardous waste facilities under sections 144.43 to 144.47 and 144.60 to 144.74, Stats., are subject to the contested case hearing provisions of section 227.42, Stats.

This notice is provided pursuant to section 227.48(2), Stats.

12. Attachments

Map 1: Proposed Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area.

Map 2: Proposed Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area and Ecological Landscapes.

Table 1: Proposed protection goals for the Central Wisconsin Grassland Conservation Area