

CHAPTER V: ALTERNATIVES and their ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

A. Introduction

Throughout the process of developing this draft master plan, many alternatives and options to meet the property vision and goals were evaluated. There are, of course, numerous small-scale variations to the proposed draft master plan that were examined. For example, different configurations of where to manage for grasslands and oak openings in the Magazine Area or which of the former roads to convert to biking and equestrian trails in the Northeast Moraine. In addition, the department evaluated regional needs, public input, property characteristics and other factors to identify a wide variety of potential recreation opportunities worthy of assessing. This chapter describes the more substantive alternatives that were considered when developing the draft master plan, their potential impacts, and the reasons they were not incorporated into the draft master plan.

The master plan lays out the department's plan for managing the property over the next 15 years. Some ideas were evaluated but were not included in the plan because the department does not have the staff or resources to pursue them at the present time. These options might be appropriate for the property later and are described here with the thought that they might be helpful as an initial list of options to consider in future updates to the plan.

B. The “no action” or minimal management alternative

Alternative: Given the unique history and condition of the property, if the property is to reach the recreation and conservation potential described in the proposed master plan there is a very large amount of work ahead for the department. An alternative to the proposed plan is for the department to simply let SPSRA remain largely “as is” and to undertake just a minimal amount of management work to address any safety issues that emerge and provide minimal facilities to support recreational use. In this alternative, the department would invest few resources in habitat management actions to restore and enhance habitats and instead would rely heavily on volunteers to maintain grasslands and savannas. Similarly, only a few facilities, such as parking lots, would be constructed to accommodate visitors.

Discussion: Taking very limited management actions at SPSRA would likely result in several undesirable outcomes. Most obviously from a habitat perspective, the invasive plants (particularly shrubs) that are proliferating through the property would most probably spread throughout the property at increasing densities. This would further degrade the ecological quality of the property and prevent the development of the grassland to forest continuum. In the absence of management, over decades some parts dominated by shrubs may succeed to forests and the property would no longer provide important grassland habitat for birds. Without management, much of the property would likely become impenetrable thickets of brush.

From a recreation standpoint, SPSRA could be “managed” without any facilities or developments. The department could simply construct a limited number of parking lots around the exterior and require visitors to walk (or possibly bicycle or ride horses) into the property on the former roads, which would presumably slowly deteriorate over time. Without adequate habitat management, the quality of hunting and wildlife watching experiences would be greatly diminished.

If the department doesn't develop and maintain roads, trails, interpretive displays, and other facilities, providing interpretation of the site and educating visitors about the property's unique human and natural history would be very difficult.

Taking a minimal approach to management would cost far less than the proposed plan, but would also likely result in very little visitation and economic benefit to the area. In addition, this alternative would likely lead the NPS to consider the property to be in noncompliance with the department's original justification for obtaining the property and would potentially put the SPSRA in jeopardy of reversion to the federal government.

Decision: To meet the property's potential and to achieve the goals for which the property was acquired, the department concluded that this alternative was unacceptable.

C. Property and administrative alternatives

1. DIFFERENT VEHICLE ACCESS POINTS

Alternative: Given the configuration of ownership parcels, vehicle access to the property could be via USH 12, STH 78, Keller Road, or at the end of Halweg Road. The department evaluated options other than the main entrance on USH 12 for a single entry point, as well as the potential to have two or more access points.

Discussion: Although alternative entrances are possible, each has complications and obstacles. An entrance at the end of Halweg Road in the northeastern corner of the SPSRA property would require additional road construction work and would likely create an undesirable increase in the traffic on this local dead-end road. The Keller Road entrance at the southeastern corner of the property would also require some road improvements and, more importantly, require all the traffic to flow through the Magazine Area (and across DFRC land) to get to the rest of the property and the reservoir overlook (which is likely to be the most popular place on the property). This traffic pattern would impact groups hosting a variety of special events in the Magazine Area and cause additional disruption to DFRC operations.

Incorporating an entrance from STH 78 was recommended by the Town of Merrimac to make access into the property easier for people arriving from the east. Adding an entry point on STH 78 in addition to USH 12 would not only reduce travel time for some people, it would reduce traffic at any one entrance. If the USH 12 and STH 78 entrances were connected by a drivable route, SPSRA would likely become a short-cut connection for hundreds of vehicles a day. This scenario would both interfere with visitors' enjoyment of the property and substantially complicate department staff's ability to monitor and control property use.

Currently, the department does not own land at an existing access gate along STH 78 and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation is unlikely to authorize another entrance in the section of the highway where department land fronts the road. Thus, the department would have to acquire additional land or rights at an existing entrance (most likely Gate 7) in order for access from STH 78 to be an option.

Decision: The department recognizes the benefit of allowing some form of access to the property from STH 78, however does not currently have the staffing needed to adequately address the associated property monitoring and control that would be needed if a drivable connection between the two highways were created. Thus, the department will pursue options to develop limited access into the property from STH 78 that do not result in the creation of a short-cut between USH 12 and STH 78. As a step towards developing potential access from STH 78, this master plan also proposes to adjust the SPSRA project boundary along the southeastern portion (see below).

2. PROPERTY BOUNDARY MODIFICATION

Alternative: This draft master plan proposes to modify the existing project boundary in two ways. First, this master plan proposes to remove the Ho-Chunk Nation lands from the SPSRA project boundary. As noted in the Introduction, when the initial project boundary was established it was unclear which lands would be

transferred to the Ho-Chunk Nation and which might come to the department. This issue has now been resolved and in recognition that the Ho-Chunk Nation is a sovereign nation the department is proposing to remove their 1,553 acres from the SPSRA project boundary.

Second, this master plan proposes to modify the project boundary to align it with the new STH 78 location along the southeastern portion of the property. The current project boundary here is convoluted line that includes land that the department has no interest in acquiring and passes through the Dairy Forage Research Center's farm complex. Further, in part due to the recent improvements to STH 78 that realigned sections of the road, the existing boundary leaves out a small strip of land contiguous with STH 78 that the department may wish to acquire in order to provide public access rights into SPSRA at an existing entry road (Gate 7, see above).

Another change to the property boundary that was evaluated was to modify the remaining project boundary to simply coincide with the department's land ownership. This would exclude former BAAP lands owned (or to be owned) by DFRC, the Bluffview Sanitary District, Department of Transportation and the Town of Sumpter. This would also exclude the small part of the boundary that connects the Lake Wisconsin frontage at Weigand's Bay to the main part of the SPSRA property.

Discussion: Reducing the project boundary to correspond with the intended department ownership would remove any misinterpretation that may exist that the department seeks to acquire lands from the partners who also own land that was part of the former BAAP. Although at some point in the future the department may wish to establish a trail to connect the Weigand's Bay parcel with the main part of the SPSRA property, it does not propose a connection now. Removing the privately-owned lands would also make this apparent.

However, at some point in the future, the department may seek to exchange or trade lands with partners inside the proposed project boundary. Or, similarly, if a landowner inside the boundary no longer wishes to own or manage some of their property, the department may want to take on the ownership or management responsibilities of these lands. And if there is a demand for a trail connection to Weigand's Bay at some point in the future, the department may wish to pursue acquiring a narrow strip of land to the main part of SPSRA. Modifying the existing boundary as part of this master plan could potentially require making another modification later.

The existing ownership arrangement was agreed to by the Badger Intergovernmental Group⁵² and reflects the department's and its partners' desire to work together on issues of joint management interest and concern. Further, the public was informed in 2002 of this boundary, and little has changed in terms of ownership issues (other than the Ho-Chunk Nation receiving their land) to necessarily trigger a further boundary change. Finally, it may be premature to modify the boundary before the department has a better understanding of operation and management issues that may emerge in the future.

Decision: The department concluded that it was most appropriate to propose removing the Ho-Chunk Nation land from the project boundary and aligning the southeastern boundary with STH 78, but to retain the remainder of the boundary for now.

⁵² The BIG included representatives from: the department, GSA, U.S. Army, DFRC, Ho-Chunk Nation, Governor's Office, DOA, Sauk County, and the Towns of Sumpter and Merrimac.

3. LONG TERM USE AND MAINTENANCE OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDING (BUILDING 207)

Alternative: Building 207, near the main entrance gate, is neither a particularly notable example of BAAP construction nor in good condition. Yet, it is one of the few buildings remaining from the plant complex and as such is one of the last links to the BAAP and could be part of “telling the story” of the property. The department evaluated options for maintaining the building for long-term use by staff, as a visitor center, or for the Badger History Group.

Discussion: The cost of addressing the near-term repairs needed to prevent further deterioration of the building and to bring the building into ADA compliance is estimated to total approximately \$100,000. The cost to restore the building and bring it to an acceptable standard for long-term use by staff or the public is far greater and exceeds currently available funds.

The department consulted with the Badger History Group about their potential long-term use of the existing administrative building. The group does not have the fiscal resources to take on repair and maintenance costs to upgrade the building for long-term use. Both the department and BHG reached concurrence that the building does not meet either party’s long-term needs and it was appropriate to look to other solutions.

Decision: The department concluded that it is appropriate to make necessary repairs to Building 207 as described on page 95, to ensure short-term use but that the structure should ultimately be removed.

4. LAND MANAGEMENT CLASSIFICATIONS

Alternative: Four of the seven land management classifications described in Administrative Code are proposed at SPSRA. SPSRA could be classified entirely as a recreation management area, entirely as a habitat management area, or could have more or less native community management area. Or, a different combination of recreation management area, habitat management area, special management area, and native community management area could be implemented than what is proposed. Alternatively, other land management classifications (forest production area, scenic resources management area, wild resources management area) could be assigned, although these classifications do not appear to be appropriate fits for the property.

Discussion: As stated earlier, many recreation and habitat outcomes are authorized and possible under all land management classifications. From a practical standpoint, what is far more relevant than the land management classification is the suite of recreation facilities and habitat management actions that are proposed in the master plan. That is, since a variety of habitat and recreation outcomes are possible under land management classifications, the title of the classification is less critical than the content of the actions proposed.

Decision: Although the department considered classifying the entire property either recreation management area or a habitat management area, it concluded that a combination of classifications tailored to the property’s different goals and objectives was most appropriate. The department strongly emphasizes that restoring and managing high quality grassland and savanna habitats throughout SPSRA and the development and operation of recreation facilities to provide high quality recreation experiences throughout SPSRA are concurrent and compatible goals.

5. ADDITIONAL VEHICLE ACCESS DURING THE NINE-DAY DEER GUN SEASON

Alternative: The department considered opening the service road running along the southern boundary of the Central Grassland to vehicles during the nine-day deer gun season to make it easier for hunters to retrieve deer.

Discussion: Temporarily opening these routes would result in all areas of SPSRA being within about a 600 yard ($3/8^{\text{th}}$ of a mile) walk of a vehicle.

Opening the service road and trail to cars and trucks for the nine-day deer gun season could impact other visitors who wish to hunt in more remote settings. It may also impact other visitors to SPSRA that are using the trail for hiking, biking or horseback riding. Adjusting the management of the property to accommodate a particular user group (in this case deer hunters) could also result in other user groups requesting similar treatment.

Decision: At over 3,400 acres SPSRA is a relatively large property for southern Wisconsin. However, its configuration combined with the proposed road network results in the most remote part of the property being slightly less than three-quarters of a mile from the nearest road. This distance is in line with other large department properties in the southern part of the state. The department concluded there were not adequate benefits or justifications to temporarily providing more vehicle access to the property during the nine-day deer gun season.

6. MAINTAIN THE EAST RESERVOIR

Alternative: The department considered leaving the east reservoir in its current condition (and the six foot chain link fence encircling the reservoir) and leaving the neotenic salamanders in place.

Discussion: Leaving the east reservoir as is would allow the opportunity to potentially view the neotenic salamanders to those visitors with guided access inside the chain link fence. The department's ability to facilitate this access would be limited. Leaving the east reservoir as is would also allow visitors to see a remaining piece of infrastructure from the days of the BAAP operation. This would likely add to many visitors' overall experiences and levels of satisfaction with their trip. Leaving the east reservoir would also maintain the population of neotenic salamanders, as well as other life forms in the water, for some period of time.

However, it is unknown how long the reservoir will continue to hold water. The west reservoir has apparently developed cracks that limit its depth to about three feet; it is likely that the east reservoir will also develop cracks over time.

The reservoir has steep-sloped sides that, should someone accidentally fall in, are very difficult to scale. As a consequence, it poses a substantial drowning hazard. The department could attach ladders along the sides, position life rings around, and install other safety devices. These improvements would likely require only a modest investment. More importantly, the department does not have the resources to monitor and prevent visitors from inadvertently or intentionally harming the population of neotenic salamanders. The overlook site here is likely to be the most popular spot at the property and it is probable that the reservoir would also end up collecting a substantial amount of trash over time. Maintaining the east reservoir would also limit the department's ability to restore the site and convert it to a focal point for visitors.

Decision: The department supports efforts to maintain neotenic salamanders for research and educational purposes and has funded research on issues related to transporting the animals, metamorphosis, and husbandry. However, the department believes the reservoirs are not an effective or appropriate place to

maintain these animals over the long-term. As a result, after all the institutions have received the desired number of neotenic salamanders and funding is available, the department proposes to drain the reservoirs, crack the bottoms, fill them with material and then develop and restore the site as a day use area with an overlook, picnic area, small amphitheater, and parking lot.

Figure 20: Looking north from the Gateway Corridor across the Ho-Chunk Nation Land.



Thomas Meyer, 2015

D. Recreational use and opportunity alternatives

The department considered a variety of different options related to the recreational use of the property. Some alternatives centered on which activities to include in the collection of recreation activities proposed, others on finding appropriate places for specific activities. Some alternatives focused on different approaches to providing high quality recreation experiences for these activities (e.g., different lengths of trails, locations of facilities, and orientation of different activities).

An example is the proposed rocketry site. Characteristics of a suitable launch site include an area that is largely treeless within about 1,500', where the prevailing winds would likely drift rockets over department land, relatively easy to access (especially in the winter when launches are likely), and a site that would be relatively easy to keep clear of vegetation. In trying to find potential sites that would minimize conflicts, the department also looked at other recreation activities proposed at SPSRA, their potential locations, and the anticipated levels of use. Needless to say, there are numerous possibilities and permutations that the department considered.

The following section describes the more substantive alternatives related to recreation that were considered during the development of the draft master plan but not included.

1. DOG TRAINING AND TRIALING

Alternative: The department received requests to consider incorporating a Class 1 dog training and/or dog trialing area at SPSRA. The department also considered prohibiting all other recreational uses in a Class 1 or 2 site (which can be done at state recreation areas, but not state wildlife areas).

Discussion: Class 1 training and trialing sites are open all year to anyone holding a dog training/ trialing license. Releasing captive animals and shooting are authorized year-round. Two of the five designated Class 1 training and trialing sites in the state are within 15 miles of SPSRA (Pine Island Wildlife Area and the Mazomanie Unit of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway). Class 1 training and trialing grounds are typically hundreds of acres in size.

Previously, there had been a bigger difference in the operation and function between Class 1 and Class 2 dog training grounds. Now, through a streamlining effort by the department, there is less distinction between these sites. Under the new system, anyone holding a dog training license can access any Class 2 dog training ground (license holders no longer need to seek approval to use individual sites). The department is also undertaking an effort to expand the number of Class 2 training grounds throughout the state.

Decision: Dog trialing events are proposed to be allowed at SPSRA under a special event permit. The master plan proposes that the Magazine Area be used to host a limited number of special events and the area appears well-suited to host a dog trialing event. The establishment of the proposed 72-acre Class 2 site will accommodate dog training all year and will function like a small Class 1 training site. Thus, the department concluded that a designated Class 1 dog training or trialing ground was not warranted at SPSRA since the goals of providing dog training and trialing will be accomplished by the proposed master plan.

2. LARGER AND MORE ELABORATE VISITOR CENTER

Alternative: The Badger History Group has many more items and documents related to the construction and operation of the BAAP than can be displayed in the current museum space in the administrative building (Building 207). The BHG would like to display its materials in a larger space than is being planned in the proposed visitor center.

Discussion: A larger visitor and interpretive center, while potentially attracting a larger number of visitors, could require considerably more funding. A larger center and associated visitation could also lead to increased impacts to habitats and species.

Decision: State funding for a visitor center, regardless of size, is likely to be limited for several years and any new facility would also compete against other capital development projects throughout the state. The department is likely to prioritize a visitor center at Devil's Lake State Park (in collaboration with the National and State Ice Age Trail) ahead of a facility at SPSRA.

The department believes a modest visitor center would compete favorably for state funds, but will likely take 8 to 10 years to work through the capital development process. If private funds for a more elaborate visitor center at SPSRA can be collected to supplement state funds, the department could evaluate how to best leverage these funds.

3. DEDICATED MOTORIZED RECREATION AREA

Alternative: The department evaluated the possibility of designating part of SPSRA as a motorized recreation area for ATV, UTV, motorcycle, and/or four-wheel drive truck use. In addition, the department evaluated combining a designated motorized recreation area with a longer motorized use trail, generally around the perimeter of SPSRA.

Discussion: Including a motorized recreation area (MRA) at the property would likely generate use and potentially increase overall visitation to SPSRA. This could increase the economic impact of the property.

The increased noise and dust associated with motorized use could adversely affect other visitors to the property, as well as impact nearby residents. The department listed motorized activities as a potential use in the Magazine Area in one of the three conceptual alternatives presented to the public in 2013. The public was overwhelmingly in opposition to including a dedicated area for motorized use at SPSRA.

The use of part of SPSRA for a motorized recreation area would also impact wildlife in the immediate and surrounding area. The noise and dust generated could result in displacement of desired species, including rare and declining grassland birds.

The department recognizes there is growing demand for motorized recreation opportunities in southern Wisconsin. While SPSRA meets some of the NRB-approved criteria for locating a motorized recreation area, in addition to the site's ecological values, there was strong local opposition to siting a MRA here. Opposition was also voiced from the department's primary neighbors here, the Ho-Chunk Nation and the Dairy Forage Research Center.

Decision:

The department concluded that SPSRA is not well suited to host a concentrated motorized recreation area but rather could host a limited number of special events for motorized recreation. In evaluating demand for different types of motorized recreation and existing opportunities throughout the region and state, the department concluded that an acceptable use of SPSRA would be to allow dual-sport motorcycles up to six days a year on a subset of roads and biking and horseback riding trails.

4. ESTABLISH A YEAR-ROUND DOG PARK

Alternative: The department considered the possibility of designating an area for visitors to have their dogs off-leash year-round. Two areas were considered: (1) about 50 acres in the northeast part of the Magazine Area, and (2) a portion of the Southern Link unit east of STH 78.

Discussion: In state parks, dogs are required to be on a leash not more than eight feet long at all times. On most other state properties except State Natural Areas, dogs are allowed off-leash (outside of designated use areas) except from April 15 to July 31 (to protect ground nesting animals).

Allowing dogs to be off-leash year-round in an area would displace mammals and birds from the area and could reduce the reproductive success of animals that nest on or near the ground in the site.

The department, and in particular the Parks & Recreation program, receives many requests throughout the year from people looking for places to have their dogs off-leash. A common request from visitors to Devil's Lake State Park is for a place their dogs to run off-leash (since they are not allowed to do so within the park). The closest public dog park is in the City of Baraboo. It is likely that a designated area in SPSRA for dogs to be off-leash year-round would be popular and used by many people.

Although many dog parks in cities are fenced, not all are. Unfenced dog parks can have issues with dogs and their owners leaving the designated boundaries. Fencing can be expensive, especially for a larger park. In addition, staff costs to monitor and address issues at dog parks can be sizeable.

Decision: The department concluded that although there is likely adequate demand to justify a fenced dog park in SPSRA, establishing one is not feasible because financial and staff resources are not currently available. As such, the department dropped consideration of designating a year-round dog park at the property. Instead, the department will designate a portion of the Magazine Area (parcels MA2, MA4, and MA5) for dogs to be off-leash from August 1 to April 14.

5. LIMIT THE RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES PROVIDED AT SPSRA TO ONLY ACTIVITIES THAT WERE UNCONTROVERSIAL

Alternative: The department considered the option of not including opportunities for the recreation activities that generated opposition during the public review period of the initial draft master plan. The activities that produced the most controversy were: (1) permitting dual-sport motorcycles up to six days per year on a subset of biking and equestrian trails, and (2) the launching of model rockets up to ten days per year. Other activities that were opposed included mountain biking, horseback riding, snowmobiling, hunting, dog training, and trapping.

Discussion: The department's application to receive the land through the NPS' Federal Lands to Parks program stated the intent to manage the property for low impact recreation and listed some activities as examples of recreation opportunities that the department expected might be provided. The application clearly stated that the activities ultimately allowed on the property would be determined as the department went through the property planning process described in NR 44, Wis. Adm. Code.

Of course, each property is unique in terms of ecological, social, institutional, or economic attributes; together, these influence the recreational demands and habitat needs that the property may be well suited to provide. The department recognizes that a few of the proposed recreational uses at SPSRA are opposed by people who commented on the draft plan, but the agency's goal and responsibility is to provide the full range of outdoor experiences on our portfolio of properties.

Similarly, the department does not seek to maximize the number of people on a property in general and certainly not each day. The department has long held that it is acceptable to include activities at properties (permanently or temporarily) even if they may displace other visitors. Some department properties have more intensive uses (year-round or occasionally) while others only provide for less intensive uses. The department owns more land and public access easements in Sauk County than any other county in southern

Wisconsin (over 30,000 acres); the vast majority of these lands only provide opportunities for low intensity activities. There is not a shortage of opportunities in Sauk County for people to enjoy low intensity, quiet, or remote experiences on lands open to the public.

Decision: The department concluded that the SPSRA property was an appropriate location to meet a diverse set of recreational activities, including a few atypical uses that generate impacts that some people may find unacceptable and cause them to not visit the property.

E. Habitat, species and land management alternatives

1. DESIGNATION OF STATE NATURAL AREAS AT SPSRA

Alternative: Designation or dedication of lands within SPSRA as State Natural Areas.

Discussion: Two areas in SPSRA were identified as Primary Sites in the Rapid Ecological Assessment. The information in the REA is meant to be considered along with other information when identifying opportunities for various management designations during the master planning process. The Primary Sites in SPSRA were delineated because they generally encompass the best examples of: (1) rare or representative natural communities, (2) documented occurrences of rare species populations, and/or (3) opportunities for ecological restoration or connections. These sites warrant strong consideration during the development of the property master plan for protection or restoration. In some cases, areas identified as Primary Sites that are not already State Natural Areas are designated as SNAs in the master planning process.

The REA also identified two areas as high priority grassland areas and one area as a high priority shrubland area. A sizeable portion of one of the high priority grassland blocks occurs on land that is owned by the Ho-Chunk Nation. These high-priority areas were identified because they currently provide high quality surrogate habitats that support diverse and large populations of grassland and shrubland birds. In terms of habitat quality, these areas do not rise to the level of being a Primary Site because they are ecologically degraded or in some cases planted. However, these sites do offer important management and restoration opportunities for maintaining and enhancing viable populations of grassland and shrubland birds.

The SNA program follows well established criteria in determining whether sites should be designated or dedicated as State Natural Areas.⁵³ In evaluating SPSRA, staff from the SNA program concluded that neither the Primary Sites nor the high priority grassland and shrubland areas met the criteria for inclusion into the SNA program. Thus, staff did not include a proposal to designate these parcels as State Natural Areas as part of this master plan.

Not following the criteria for SPSRA would set a precedent of including areas in the SNA program that do not meet established ecological values. The department believes that this would de-value future SNA designations and the SNA program as a whole.

Decision: The department concluded that it was most appropriate not to designate any areas within SPSRA as State Natural Areas. The highest quality portion of the Prairie and Savanna Primary Site (the portion that includes the Hillside Prairie) is proposed to be classified as a native community management area.

2. MAINTAINING MORE LAND IN FOREST COVER

Alternative: The proposed management plan calls for much of the early to mid-succession forest that has grown up since the BAAP was established in 1942 to be harvested (with oaks and some other savanna tree species such as hickory to remain) and converted to oak opening habitat. In addition, the forest along the south bluff of the Baraboo Hills is proposed to be thinned to convert it to an oak woodland habitat over time. Both the proposed oak woodland and oak opening habitats are what occurred on these areas prior to Euro-American settlement. An alternative considered was to manage these areas, or portions of them, as forest blocks following conventional forest management practices.

⁵³ See <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/Lands/naturalareas/documents/EstablishCriteria.pdf>

Similarly, the existing conifer plantations are proposed to be removed, some before they reach full maturity. An alternative considered was to maintain all the plantations to full stocking capacity.

Discussion: Managing blocks of the property as forest is feasible, but inconsistent with the department's goal for the property and would not take advantage of the unique opportunity here to manage a large block of land for an ecological transition. Further, managing blocks of the property for forest resources would miss the opportunity to manage for a native community type, oak opening, that is among the rarest in the state and country.

Deferring the harvest of all the conifer plantations and their transition to oak savanna and grassland habitats until they reach full stocking capacity is likely to delay important habitat restoration efforts.

Decision: The department concluded that it was most appropriate to manage SPSRA for the community types native to the property and to take advantage of the unique opportunity here to manage a transition of habitat types from forest (in DLSP) to oak woodland to oak opening to grassland. Although the harvest and restoration of some plantations may be deferred due to the timing of management actions on the property, other harvests will be conducted despite the fact that the trees may not have reached their highest economic value.

3. ESTABLISHING A BISON HERD

Alternative: There is a desire to return much of the SPSRA property to the conditions and ecological processes that existed before Euro-American settlement. As such, consideration was given to including a resident bison herd on SPSRA.

Discussion: Incorporating bison on the property would likely be a draw for visitors and would provide a unique opportunity on public property in Wisconsin to showcase and educate the public about bison and their impact on natural and human history. Bison herds on private and public conservation lands elsewhere in the Midwest are popular attractions, serve important management roles, and can provide some economic return. As large grazers, bison can also play a key role in habitat management.

Depending on the number of bison and where they were located on the property, their presence could restrict or alter recreational use. One potential option would be to confine a herd to a portion of SPSRA (enclosed by a substantial fence) and only provide vehicle access to the area (i.e., visitors would have to stay within their car or truck as they drove through) or provide viewing opportunities around the perimeter of the area (for example a viewing tower outside the fence). A second option would be to fence a larger area and allow visitors to walk, bike, horseback ride, cross country ski and snowshoe on trails through the area. This would be potentially feasible if the herd size and the visitor numbers were small enough to reasonably avoid public safety issues. Hunting deer, turkeys, and other game species could potentially be compatible with the second approach but would likely not be compatible with the first.

The areas where bison were located would need to have adequate fencing, which is typically 6-8' in height and designed for strength, as well as access to water and appropriate loading facilities.

Decision: The department concluded that bison may be appropriate to incorporate into the use and management of the property later, but the funds required to build and maintain the facilities that would be needed are not currently available. Further, the department wishes to evaluate visitor use patterns before making decisions that would affect the recreational opportunities at the property. Also, it may be most appropriate to evaluate options to manage a bison herd on the property in partnership with the DFRC and the HCN. As such, the department will defer decisions regarding establishing a bison herd until the pattern of recreational use and partner interest is better understood.

4. PERMANENTLY CONVERTING LAND TO ROW CROPS

Alternative: The soil in several portions of SPSRA has not been extensively altered. If the brush and early successional trees that currently grow on many of these areas were cleared, these sites could likely support row cropping and other forms of active agriculture.

Discussion: Permanently converting portions of SPSRA to conventional row crops such as corn and soybeans, pastures, or other farming practices could provide some ongoing income to the department, which it could use to fund habitat restoration and management of other SPSRA lands. However, cropland does not provide the habitat benefits of restored grassland and oak openings and would restrict recreational use during the growing season. As such, permanent cropland is not consistent with the intent or purpose of the SPSRA property. It is also restricted by conditions of the transfer of land from the National Park Service.

A benefit of row cropping is that, when different crops are grown over a series of years, weed species are dramatically reduced. This can improve the success of grassland restorations when native grasses and forbs are subsequently planted.

Decision: As described in Chapter II, the department may temporarily convert lands with appropriate soils to row crops as a means to reduce weed growth and prepare soils for replanting to native species, but is not proposing to convert land to permanent row crop use.

5. MANAGEMENT OF NEOTENIC SALAMANDER POPULATION

Alternatives: The department evaluated options for the future of the neotenic salamanders in the reservoirs. One option would be to simply leave the salamanders in the reservoir until the structure develops cracks, leaks, or for other reasons no longer held water or the salamanders are no longer in the reservoir. Another alternative, which the department initially planned to follow, would be to release the salamanders into various ponds and wetlands in the local area to allow them to carry out their natural life histories.

Discussion: As noted in the above discussion related to maintaining the east reservoir (page 172), the structure presents a serious safety and long-term management issue and there are not practical alternatives to maintaining either of the reservoirs.

The plan to release the salamanders back into the local population was removed from consideration when a health analysis determined the animals in the east reservoir harbored diseases not known to occur in the local population. If subsequent studies indicate that the diseases present in the salamander population in the east reservoir are also present in the local wild population, then the animals in the reservoirs may be released locally.

Decision: As described on page 47, the department recognizes the research and educational value of these salamanders. The department is identifying institutions (e.g., museums, aquaria, zoos, schools, and research organizations) that are interested in receiving neotenic salamanders for research, education, or display purposes. The department plans to capture and distribute the requested number of salamanders to these institutions.

Figure 21: View looking east of the main entrance gate. The Baraboo Hills are on the left and the Central Grassland is seen on the right. Much of the land in the central part of the photo is now owned by the Ho-Chunk Nation.



Badger History Group archives