EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

At its inception, the Badger Ordnance Works, as the facility was initially named, was the largest manufacturer of propellant in the world. The construction and operation of the plant had significant impacts to the local communities. With over 10,000 workers involved in the initial construction in 1942 and over 6,000 people working in continuous shifts at the plant during WWII, the region quickly recovered from the Great Depression. Today, several local businesses remain that got their starts in the early days of Badger. Although the plant fueled economic growth, disposal of waste products and contaminants followed the protocols of the day, which are now recognized as improper and inadequate and resulted in contaminated soil and groundwater. Few places in the state have had such a significant impact on the daily lives of nearby residents who rightly have strong beliefs about future use of the property.

Prior to the construction of the plant, the site was home to some 80 farm families that raised a variety of crops and animals on the exceptionally fertile soils. On short notice, families – some who had farmed their land for generations – were evicted. Like the Native Americans before them, these families did not want to leave their homes. Those hoping to remain in farming were forced to quickly find other properties to purchase, followed by the grueling task of moving their animals, hay and stored grains, equipment, and personal possessions - all in the middle of winter. Some farm families, upset at the perceived cut-rate offers for their land, found themselves in the difficult position of petitioning the federal government for a fairer price at a time when the national mood encouraged self-sacrifice in the face of world war. The former residents and their descendants understandably have deep-seated feelings about this land and its future.

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

In the face of the massive land use changes resulting from the construction, operation, and maintenance of the propellant plant, an inadvertent but positive ecological outcome emerged. With fire an annual threat even when the plant was idled, many parts of the facility were grazed and mowed to reduce fuel loads. Although they lacked the diversity of native prairies, these grasslands provided the right structure and habitat for many birds. As changing agricultural practices and conversions of farmland decimated populations of grassland birds throughout the Midwest, meadowlarks, bobolinks, bobwhite quail, dickcissels and others thrived at Badger. Like many other military installations around the country, the complex became a refuge for numerous rare species.

### Landowners of the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant

- Wisconsin DNR ............................................. 3,385 acres
- Dairy Forage Research Center ............ 2,105 acres
- Ho-Chunk Nation .................................... 1,553 acres
- Bluffview Sanitary District ..................... 163 acres
- Wisconsin DOT .............................................. 80 acres
- Town of Sumpter .......................................... 4 acres
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For many current Wisconsin residents, Badger has been and remains the mysterious place on the “other side of the fence.” For decades, thousands of cars a day drove by the enormous industrial complex that represented the single largest and most visible expression of Wisconsin’s contribution to the WWII, Korea and Vietnam War efforts. Today, nearly all of the 1,400 buildings have been taken down, utilities lines, steam pipes, and railroads have been removed, countless tons of materials have been recycled, and contaminated sites have been remediated. Vast and imposing in its day, the infrastructure of Badger has been nearly eliminated from the landscape.

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

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

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

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

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

A key component of the recreational activities will be to incorporate the property’s human and natural history into visitor experiences through a variety of approaches. Fortunately, a local history group has assembled an impressive array of artifacts, pictures, and stories from the BAAP era. Few places in Wisconsin or the Midwest are as rich with cultural, historical, geologic, and ecological stories and the Department seeks to capitalize on this unique opportunity.

During the planning process the Department received many responses to the potential inclusion of ATVs (and motorized recreation in general) and a shooting range at SPRA; a large majority of the reaction was in opposition to
both. Although it has long been a Department goal to provide more motorized recreation and shooting ranges in the southern part of the state, it is difficult to find places where these activities would not affect neighboring landowners or conflict with other public conservation lands users. After considerable deliberations, the DNR proposes to re-purpose many of the biking and equestrian trails and roads at SPRA for use by dual-sport motorcycles up to six days each year. The trails would be closed to other users during these days. No ATV riding area is proposed at SPRA.

Although no shooting range is proposed in this master plan, the Department recognizes the need to provide additional public shooting ranges in southern Wisconsin. As such, the Department will initiate a process to locate a shooting range in Sauk County, similar to the process recently used to site a new range in Columbia County. Department lands in the vicinity will be included in this evaluation. The public will have multiple opportunities to provide input in this process.

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

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

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

Are portions of the property still contaminated? What hazards remain?
The site’s use as an industrial facility that manufactured propellants resulted in contamination of some areas with chemicals and byproducts used in propellant manufacture, as well as asbestos, lead paint, PCBs and oil. Contaminants were found in buildings and storage areas and spread through the sewer system and ditches. Groundwater beneath the site is contaminated in three discrete plumes.
The Army and its contractors undertook extensive remediation efforts to address these contamination issues. As a result, all lands within SPRA now meet the environmental thresholds for use as a recreation area. The Army continues to assess and test the groundwater and visitors will see monitoring wells (red pipes) throughout the property. The responsibility for maintaining the monitoring wells, landfills and capped areas remains permanently with the Army. The Army is also responsible for addressing any contamination resulting from its use of the BAAP property that may be found later.

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

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

Unfortunately, the DNR does not have the funding to address these pressing needs. As a consequence, the agency will work with the Ho-Chunk Nation, Dairy Forage Research Center, Sauk County, local governments, and many conservation, recreation, and education groups with an interest in helping SPRA reach its potential. Of particular promise is the interest expressed by the Wisconsin Army National Guard to address some of the clean-up and development work at SPRA as part of their training exercises. The DNR is in ongoing discussions with the Guard on this front.

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

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

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

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