

SAUK PRAIRIE RECREATION AREA

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT MASTER PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
October 29, 2015

Introduction

The public comment period for the draft master plan for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area ran from August 11 to September 25, 2015. The department hosted an open house meeting and formal public hearing in Prairie du Sac on September 10. Public input was received in many formats including emails, letters, postcards, an online and paper survey, and oral testimony at the public hearing. A breakdown of the input received during the comment period is as follows:

- Letters from individuals – 24
- Postcards from individuals – 298
- Letters from organizations – 21
- Letters from governments and elected officials – 3
- Emails – 55
- “Action alert” emails – 1,125
- Online surveys – 410
- Paper surveys – 54
- People presenting oral testimony at public hearing – 38

Some respondents chose to submit comments in several of these formats. The postcards and the action alert emails were both organized by the Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger (CSWAB). At least 140 people appear to have submitted two or more “action alert” emails. The Town of Merrimac and the USDA Dairy Forage Research Center submitted comments. Senator Erpenbach and Representative Considine submitted a joint letter.

All the input received has been posted in its entirety on the DNR’s website.

The department is thankful for all the input received and the time and effort people took to reflect on the draft master plan. The department considers all public input, but is particularly appreciative of people that submitted comments going beyond a simple statement of support for, or opposition to, a specific issue. Comments that explained the reasoning behind a stance or the nature of concerns were most useful.

As has been stated before, it is clear from the number of comments received that the future use and management of SPRA is meaningful to many Wisconsin residents. The department seeks public input to better understand the overall range of perspectives and the reasoning behind these viewpoints. Public input on the content of master plans is not a “vote” where the greatest number of respondents advocating a particular position necessarily drive what is or isn’t ultimately included. Rather, our approach is to carefully read through all the comments and material presented to find common themes and issues and the underlying beliefs that drive different perspectives.

The next step for the department is to determine and incorporate changes to the draft master plan based on public input. In addition, the department will develop an accompanying document that describes the changes made to the draft master plan and environmental impact statement and explains the department’s reasoning behind why other changes were not made.

Input received

This document focuses on summarizing the issues and perspectives that were most commonly raised. As is seen in the following section, recreation issues were at the heart of many comments. The following summary organizes the comments received by general topic.

OVERALL CONTENT of the MASTER PLAN

In general, respondents felt that the master plan appropriately balanced recreation and conservation goals. Some people stated that the plan placed somewhat too much emphasis on either recreation or conservation, with more people stating that the plan emphasized recreation too much.

A range of comments were received about the overall plan. Some people believed that the department did not adequately honor the former work of the Badger Reuse Committee. Some people also stated that they didn't believe the draft master plan followed the nine values that were identified by the committee in 2001.

Some people recognized the difficulty of developing a management plan for a controversial property. Some people believed that the proposed plan was an appropriate compromise among many conflicting demands.

Of the people that commented about the organization or content of the document, few believed it was confusing or unclear.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

Nearly all of the input received agreed with the mix of habitats proposed and the various techniques the department anticipates using to achieve ecological outcomes. There were a few requests to place more management emphasis on grassland (rather than oak opening) habitats and grassland birds. Many people commented in support of restoring the ecological transition from forest to savanna to grassland. Many people were pleased that so much land would eventually be restored to native conditions.

Several respondents encouraged the DNR to coordinate habitat management objectives and actions with the Ho-Chunk Nation and Dairy Forage Research Center.

Other concerns related to habitat and species management that were raised:

- Neotenic salamanders. Several respondents noted the unique adaptation of the population of neotenic salamanders that live in the east reservoir and believed that the department should keep the reservoir in order to save this population. In addition, several noted the potential scientific value of the neotenic salamanders as well as the educational value for visitors.
- Birds and other wildlife. Some respondents noted the current declines in rare grassland and savanna bird populations and believed the property's focus should be just on managing habitats for these and other wildlife species.

RECREATION MANAGEMENT

Many of the comments received stated a concern that some activities would have significant adverse impacts on both wildlife and other visitors to SPRA. Horseback riding, mountain biking, rocketry, dual sport-motorcycles, hunting, trapping and snowmobile riding were all noted in this regard. The majority of respondents opposed to specific recreation activities recommended that launching model rockets and riding dual-sport motorcycles on roads and biking and equestrian trails should not be allowed at SPRA. In addition, several people commented that allowing some or all of these recreation activities was not consistent with either the DNR's earlier statements to use the property for low-impact recreation or the DNR's application to the National Park Service to receive the property through the Federal Lands to Parks program. A few people commented that rocketry and motorcycle uses had not been considered previously and were opposed to activities considered late in the property planning process.

Some people recognized a need for the DNR to provide opportunities for higher-impact activities, but asserted that there were ample or better opportunities elsewhere in the state for these activities.

What follows is a summary of comments received related to *specific recreation activities*.

Equestrian use

Generally, there was appreciation for the proposed 12 miles of equestrian trails. Some riders hoped that more miles could be added, including the possibility of allowing horseback riding on the snowmobile trail (during non-winter months) if that trail was located in the eastern perimeter corridor. Several people commented that the parking lot at the equestrian trailhead needed to be bigger than what is proposed (10 large trailer rigs and 6 cars). There was support to link trails in SPRA to potential equestrian trails in Devil's Lake State Park.

Some respondents supported allowing horse-drawn carts on some or all of the equestrian trails year-round (the draft plan proposes to limit horse-drawn carts to two weekends/year), citing the lack of conflicts between horse-drawn carts and horseback riders.

Some people were opposed to providing equestrian trails because they believed such use would have too high an impact, would cause erosion, and would lead to an increasing invasive plant problem.

Snowmobile use

Currently there is a snowmobile trail on SPRA and land owned by DFRC in the southeastern portion of the former BAAP, but the trail is located outside the perimeter fence along the eastern and northeastern portions of the SPRA. The draft master plan calls for a snowmobile trail to be located either on or immediately adjacent to the Great Sauk Trail or along the eastern side of SPRA, inside the perimeter fence.

Regardless of its eventual location, several people commented that the maps and the language in the draft master plan needed to be clarified and consistent. Most people advocated for locating a snowmobile trail along the eastern side of the property, but within the boundary of the SPRA and land owned by DFRC. From some snowmobilers' perspective, the proposed route along the eastern side of the property was more desirable both because it was a more interesting ride than the GST and because, in addition to providing a north-south linkage between the southern SPRA boundary and Burma Road (which leads into Devil's Lake State Park), it would also enable riders to link to the trail that heads east to Merrimac. Several other people also noted their support for locating the snowmobile trail on the eastern side of the property to minimize the noise impact to the rest of the property.

A small number of respondents were opposed to any snowmobile trail on the property citing noise, pollution, and impacts to other visitors to the property.

Rocketry

People in support of launching model rockets at SPRA noted the need for safe sites in which to operate. These respondents also stated the value that the activity has in generating interest, particularly in high school, in the fields of science and engineering. People in support of rocketry also noted that there are no other legal launch sites on public properties in the region and that the closest public site is at the DNR's Richard Bong Recreation Area in Kenosha County.

Many respondents were opposed to allowing launching model and high powered rockets, citing a concern that the noise would have a negative impact on wildlife and other visitors' enjoyment of the property. Many people believed that rocketry was inconsistent with the DNR's original intentions for the property. Some people believed that launching rockets would lead to contamination, pollution, or could cause wildfires in surrounding grasslands.

Some horseback riders expressed concern that the proposed rocket launching site was too close to some equestrian trails; others suggested that they wouldn't visit the property when rockets were being launched because their horse would be too unsettled by the noise.

The Dairy Forage Research Center expressed concern that the proposed location for rocket launching may result in rockets inadvertently landing on their lands and that in retrieving them, people may damage crops or research projects. In addition, the Center expressed concern for potential crop loss due to fires resulting from wayward rockets.

Hunting

A few people voiced opposition to hunting and trapping on the property. Some people recommended shortening the allowable time period for hunting to mid-November to May 1 to minimize conflicts with the anticipated large number of visitors pursuing other activities (such as biking, hiking, bird watching and horseback riding) in the fall and spring. This time period would correspond with the hunting seasons permitted in most state parks.

Dual-sport motorcycle use

People in support of repurposing trails and roads for motorcycles commented that there is very high demand for off-road riding opportunities that is currently underserved. Some advocates for off-road motorcycling were disappointed that a dedicated trail for motorcycles open throughout the year was not included in the draft master plan. Generally, it appeared that people who participate in dual-sport motorcycling wish there would have been more opportunities at SPRA but were pleased to be included, albeit on a limited basis.

Some people in support of dual-sport motorcycling also noted that there are numerous opportunities for people to pursue quieter activities throughout the region.

Many people expressed concerns about the impacts that dual-sport motorcycles would have on wildlife. The most common concern was that the vehicles would disturb or displace animals, particularly birds, at the property. Many people were also concerned that the noise from dual-sport motorcycles would adversely impact other visitors and their enjoyment of the property. Some people stated that even the temporary use of motorcycles on the biking and equestrian trails would cause significant damage to the trails leaving them unusable for their primary uses.

For safety reasons, the draft master plan proposes that the roads and trails temporarily (six days/year) repurposed for use by dual-sport motorcycles would be closed to other users. Some people opposed the temporary closure of these roads and trails and questioned what visitors interested in biking or horseback riding would do if they arrived at the property to find that many of the trails and roads were closed.

Dairy Forage Research Center requested that dual-sport motorcycle events be limited to weekends or holidays to minimize conflicts with the movement of farm vehicles and that the roads needed for their farm vehicles (see Map F, DFRC Accessway) not be repurposed for use by motorcycles.

Mountain biking

People in support of incorporating mountain biking trails noted the demand for opportunities in the region and the current lack of trails. Some also noted the draw that mountain bike riding has with today's youth. Several supported the potential to link to potential trails in Devil's Lake State Park, although some noted that trails should be constructed at SPRA without waiting for connecting trails to be authorized at DLSP. Some people suggested adding more miles of trails in SPRA to provide a better experience.

Some people voiced opposition to mountain biking trails because their use would lead to erosion and was generally inconsistent with managing the SPRA for low-impact uses.

Hiking and walking

Several people requested additional hiking opportunities be developed, including long distance trails from both Lake Wisconsin and the Hillside Prairie north to the proposed visitor center and on up to the reservoir site. As can be seen below in the input on what people expected they would do at the property, hiking and walking were the top uses.

Dog training, dog trialing, and off-leash dog use

Some people commented that there is significant unmet need for Class 1 dog trialing grounds and that the 600-acre Magazine Area should be designated as such.

Some concern was raised that the proposed site for the Class 2 training ground is too brushy and wooded for practical training use. Other people were opposed to any dog training site on SPRA and were specifically concerned that shooting firearms as part of training exercises (as occurs at other Class 1 and 2 dog training sites around the state and as would be allowed at SPRA) would have a significant adverse impact on other visitors to the property, wildlife (particularly birds), and neighboring landowners.

There was a request to allow judges and/or marshals to be on horseback during dog trialing events.

Some people expressed concerns that off-leash dogs in the Magazine Area, where biking trails are proposed, would lead to conflicts (primarily dogs chasing bikers). Other people noted concern that off-leash dogs would negatively impact nesting birds and other wildlife. Finally, Dairy Forage Research Center (which owns land surrounding the Magazine Area) expressed concern that dogs might leave the east side of the Magazine Area and disrupt grazing research taking place on their land east of parcel MA3. DFRC requested that dogs be on-leash from April 1 to October 31 in the Magazine Area to reduce conflicts.

Special events

Some people expressed concern that special events, depending on their nature, had the potential to significantly impact visitors to the property and wildlife. Some respondents thought there should be more definition of what events would be allowed, number of participants, timing, and location.

DFRC expressed concern about the potential nature of these events and requested that any special events permitted be non-invasive, conducted on weekends or holidays, not result in people coming and going all day, and that the number of people participating not exceed available parking capacity.

Shooting range

Although a shooting range is not proposed in the draft master plan, the DNR recognizes the demand for publicly available target shooting in safe settings. As such, shortly after the master plan for SPRA is finalized, the DNR intends to initiate an evaluation of its properties in Sauk County to identify a potential site for a shooting range. Sauk Prairie Recreation Area will be included in this evaluation.

Nearly all of the people who commented on a potential shooting range voiced strong opposition. Some expressed frustration that the DNR had already received overwhelming feedback against locating a shooting range at SPRA and that the DNR still appeared to leave it as an option for the future. Most of the opposition to a shooting range was focused on the noise it would generate and the adverse impact this would have on wildlife, other visitors to the property, and neighbors.

Potential use of the property.

The survey developed to gather feedback on the draft master plan asked about people's future use of the property. Of the 392 people who responded that they anticipated visiting the property, the following activities were likely to be pursued by at least 10% of visitors:

- Hiking or walking (74% of respondents anticipated hiking or walking at the property)
- Bird and other wildlife watching (51%)
- General sightseeing (49%)
- Photography (48%)
- Recreational biking (39%)
- Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing (36%)
- Horseback riding (20%)
- Automobile driving (20%)
- Dual-sport motorcycle riding (18%)

- Snowmobiling (16%)
- Hunting (13%)
- “Fat tire” biking (12%)
- Running or conditioning (12%)

In addition to the recreation activities that are proposed in the draft master plan, some respondents requested additional activities be included at SPRA. Requests for ATV riding, 4x4 vehicle driving, and a shooting range were requested.

CULTURAL AND HISTORIC RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND INTERPRETATION

Only limited comments were received regarding the proposed management and interpretation of cultural and historic features. There was support for the proposed incorporation of various aspects of the property’s history into visitor experiences.

GENERAL, ADMINISTRATIVE, or PROPERTY-WIDE ISSUES

Some respondents, including the Town of Merrimac, requested that access to the property be made available from STH 78. As was noted by some people, visitors arriving from the east side of the property would have to drive an additional 10 miles around to the entrance on USH 12, which some people thought was wasteful.

Several respondents encouraged the department to more clearly state its intent to manage SPRA in collaboration and cooperation with the other owners of the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant property. Some suggested adding a section to the master plan that describes examples of how the landowners could work together on various projects.

Respondents noted the need for the department to monitor impacts of management actions and recreational uses of the property. Examples potentially include restoration of habitats and changes to populations of rare species, changes in the distribution of invasive species due to different types of recreation, impacts to wildlife from different types of recreation, and interactions among recreationists.

Some people noted the department’s limited staffing and expressed concern about the agency’s ability to adequately monitor visitors and enforce rules and regulations.

Some respondents stated that the land management classifications proposed were too skewed towards recreation and should be changed to reflect a greater emphasis of habitat management. In a similar vein, some people suggested changing the name of the property from the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area to the Sauk Prairie Conservation Area or the Sauk Prairie Restoration Area to better reflect the goals of the property.

Dairy Forage Research Center expressed concerns related to the proposed uses of the Magazine Area. One concern is that the roads that the department proposes to allow the Center to drive farm equipment on are not adequately shown on the maps. A second concern is the potential for accidents if there is considerable traffic on the roads leading to and in the Magazine Area. A third concern is the potential for the public to trespass on their land and disturb crops or research projects.

Several people noted the need to provide quiet places for people to relax, connect with the outdoors and hear natural sounds such as bird calls and the wind. They expressed concern that launching model rockets and riding motorcycles, even on a limited basis, would detract from people’s ability to experience quiet throughout the property.

An attorney representing the Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance expressed concern that some of the activities proposed are not consistent with the department’s application to the National Park Service (NPS) to receive the property. Specifically, their perspective was that the department does not have the legal authority to allow the launching of model rockets, riding motorcycles on repurposed roads and trails, dog training in a Class II training ground, and snowmobile riding on a trail through the middle of the property without approval from the NPS.

Further, their perspective was that if the department sought to allow these activities without NPS approval the SPRA property would revert back to the National Park Service.

FACILITIES

Some people requested that the department leave the east reservoir “as is” and to leave the population of neotenic salamanders. Related to this, some people suggested reducing the size of the developed footprint at the reservoir site. It was suggested to move the proposed amphitheater to the visitor center grounds to more centrally locate the facility. Another suggestion was to reduce the size of the parking lot. People questioned why the agency would spend limited funds to raze the reservoirs when higher priority habitat management and restoration work was needed.

Some respondents, including the Town of Merrimac, requested that the entry road from STH 78 to the future Weigand’s Bay day use area be moved off of its current alignment to a new alignment to the north, so as to shield it from the houses along Weigand’s Bay South Road. In addition, the Town requested more parking be provided at or near the day use area and to eliminate the proposed overflow parking.

ANALYSIS of ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Several people stated that the descriptions of anticipated impacts from various factors, but most commonly recreation activities such as rocketry, motorcycle riding, dog training, and horseback riding, were not well explained or documented and needed to be expanded and clarified. It was suggested that these activities will have significant environmental impacts that the department should disclose. The department was also requested to further explain the long-term, cumulative, and precedential impacts, as well as the potential alternatives and their impacts.

It was also suggested that a description of the anticipated impacts from the proposed Wisconsin Army National Guard use of the property be included.