

Summary of public comments on the draft  
*vision, goals and conceptual management alternatives*  
**for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area**

As part of the process to develop a master plan for the new Sauk Prairie Recreation Area (SPRA), the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) recently asked for public input on a draft vision and goals for the property. In addition, the department asked for feedback on three conceptual alternatives to the management and use of the property. A large portion of the input and comments focused on potential future recreational uses that were described in the conceptual alternatives. This document provides a brief overview of those conceptual alternatives, how public input was gathered, how staff analyzed the comments, and a summary of the messages heard. This document concludes with a short description of next steps.

### **Summary of Conceptual Alternatives**

In developing the three conceptual alternatives<sup>1</sup>, department staff considered the Badger Reuse Plan (2001), the ecological and physical capabilities of the property, the region's recreation supply and demand, and public comments received during the first phase of the planning process.

The first alternative was the required "no action" option which proposed no new developments or actions. The primary purpose of a "no action" alternative is to establish a baseline by which to evaluate and compare the actions proposed in the other two conceptual alternatives. The "no action" alternative proposed no habitat restoration or property development. Access would be limited to foot travel with only associated recreation activities accommodated. Public road access to the cemeteries would be maintained.

Conceptual Alternative 2 proposed an emphasis on ecological restoration with large tracts of grasslands and shrublands dominating the property. Access would be limited to pedestrian use. Interpretive and educational opportunities would be limited, although outdoor classroom opportunities would be available for schools.

Conceptual Alternative 3 proposed an emphasis on providing a variety of recreational uses and interpretive and educational opportunities related to the property's history and restoration efforts. Opportunities for hunting, fishing, trapping hiking, cross country skiing, wildlife watching, picnicking, biking, horseback riding, and boat access would be within one portion of the property. Habitat management, similar to Alternative 2, would be the focus of another portion of the property, which would also be open for some recreation activities such as hunting, trapping, hiking, and wildlife watching. Motorized use and a shooting range would be provided at a separate, disjunct portion of the department's ownership.

Department staff stressed the alternatives presented were not an all-or-nothing choice and instead encouraged people to comment on what they liked best and least about each alternative. Indeed, members of the Badger Oversight and Management Commission (BOMC) developed and proposed a fourth conceptual alternative that combined aspects of alternatives 2 and 3.

### **Methods of gathering public input**

The public comment period ran from July 15 to August 30, 2013. On July 31<sup>st</sup>, the department hosted an open house meeting in Prairie du Sac to present the draft vision, goals, and conceptual alternatives. Over 250 people attended.

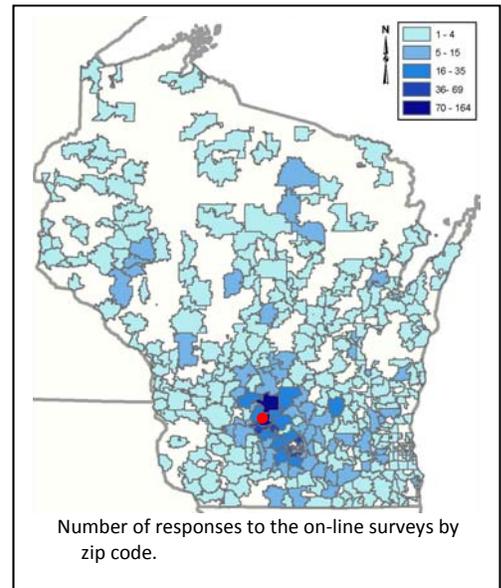
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<sup>1</sup> The draft vision, goals, and conceptual alternatives can be viewed at the department's web site ([dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov), then search for "Sauk Prairie Recreation Area").



During the comment period, the department sought comments and input through multiple channels. The following input was received:

- On-line survey – 1,332 surveys, partially or completely filled out. The survey presented the draft vision, goals, and conceptual alternatives and asked respondents to provide their comments and recommendations on how these statements could be improved.
- Hardcopy survey – 27 surveys, partially or completely filled out. Same questions as the on-line survey.
- Emails – 603 emails received.
- Letters –
  - 91 letters or notes received from the general public
  - 13 letters from organizations representing various constituents and three from government representatives (USDA Dairy Forage Research, the Ho-Chunk Nation, and the UW-Madison College of Agriculture & Life Sciences).
  - 3 letters from elected officials (State Representative Clark, State Senator Erpenbach, United States Representative Pocan, and United States Senator Baldwin).
- Petitions and form letters – petitions and form letters that represented the views of 2,267 people were submitted.
- Resolutions – six local units of government in the immediate area of SPRA passed resolutions related to the future use and management of the property. They are: Towns of Sumpter, Merrimac, and Prairie du Sac, Villages of Sauk City and Prairie du Sac, and the City of Baraboo.



### **Our approach to analyzing the comments received:**

The department is thankful for all the input received and the time and effort that people took to reflect on the vision, goals, and conceptual alternatives and provide their perspectives. 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 is clear from the number and tenor of the comments received, the future use and management of the SPRA is meaningful to many Wisconsin residents. Although the department wanted and received many comments on the issues presented, comments or petition signatures supporting a particular point of view were not counted as votes with the “winning” point of view selected. Rather, our approach to analyzing the input received was to carefully read through all the comments and material presented to find common themes and issues. Our goal was to identify the range of reactions to the vision, goals, and conceptual alternatives and the reasoning behind those stances. If someone supported a particular use or habitat management goal, we were interested in knowing why. What motivated that perspective? Conversely, what was behind an opposition to a recreational use; what was the root of concern?

Rather than attempt to describe all of ideas and perspectives heard, this document focuses on summarizing those issues and perspectives that were most commonly raised. As is seen in the following section, motorized use and a shooting range were at the heart of many of the comments received. As mentioned earlier, after reviewing the three conceptual alternatives presented by the DNR, members of the BOMC developed “Alternative 4” as another option. This alternative includes and emphasizes a variety of quiet, low-impact recreational uses; neither motorized uses nor a shooting range are included in that alternative. People who commented that they supported or favored this alternative were considered to be opposed to including motorized use and a shooting range on the property. What follows is a summary of the input received.

## **Messages heard:**

### OVERALL VISION

The public's vision for the future of the Sauk Prairie is as diverse as the property itself. Referencing the size of the property, many folks advocated for incorporating a wide variety of opportunities and interests. There are, however, conflicting views on the types of recreation that are "good fits" for the property. Some noted that since much of the property has been heavily disturbed (combined with its large size and proximity to where many people live), the property is appropriate for higher intensity uses.

Others thought the opposite; that since significant funds have been spent cleaning up and restoring the property, the most appropriate future use is to continue restoration efforts and allow only low-impact recreational uses. A smaller number of people felt that, following a long history of intensive and impactful use, time had come for quiet use of the property and that the focus should simply be on ecological restoration and social reflection with limited access to the property. Some people expressed disappointment that the alternatives did not incorporate conservation farming and the opportunity to study ways of integrating agricultural practices into grassland and savanna management.

From a habitat perspective, there was nearly universal agreement on managing the bulk of the property as grassland, with some areas along the northern border with Devil's Lake State Park and the eastern portion being appropriate for oak woodland and savanna plant communities. Many people commented on the unique opportunity here to restore and manage a transition from the heavily forested Baraboo Hills to savanna to grassland. Although there was consensus on restoring the habitats that occurred in the area before Euro-American settlement, the majority voiced support for recreational development and use of the site. That is, people requested that the DNR continue to restore native habitats, both for their ecological value as well as for creating an appropriate setting for people's use and enjoyment of the property, whatever those uses may be.

Discussion often suggested that recreational activities must be compatible with goals of ecological restoration or preservation, and activities should avoid disturbance of cultural, scenic features, wildlife, and other natural resources. In particular, several people commented that the Badger Ordnance Works (as the property was originally known) represents the single largest and most visible expression of Wisconsin's contribution to the WWII, Korea and Vietnam war efforts and, as a consequence, its historic context needs to be told and treated with respect. There is widespread support to incorporate the site's history, from Native American use to Euro-American farm settlement to the munitions plant, into the visitor experience.

### OUTDOOR RECREATION

The vast majority of comments received by the department related to recreational use of the property with people describing a broad range of potential and desired recreational pursuits. In general, people felt that the property's size and diversity provided the opportunity to accommodate a range of recreation uses. Strong opinions were expressed regarding the need or level of intensity of specific forms of outdoor recreation that should occur on the property. There were conflicting opinions about what is considered appropriate for the Sauk Prairie setting and environment, with the potential inclusion of motorized uses and a shooting range drawing the bulk of the input.

Several people noted the need to plan recreational uses at SPRA with an eye towards the large number of visitors to Devil's Lake State Park (DLSP). Many expressed a desire to see the department provide recreation opportunities at SPRA that complement, not conflict, with the recreational experiences enjoyed at Devil's Lake. Indeed, several noted the opportunity for people to combine trips to the two properties.

What follows are more detailed descriptions of the comments received related to specific recreation activities:

#### Motorized use

For purposes of this discussion, "motorized uses" include all-terrain vehicles (ATV), utility task/terrain vehicles (UTV, sometimes referred to as side-by-sides), off-road vehicles or trucks (ORV) and off-road motorcycles or motorbikes.

Many people stated a desire to ride various motorized vehicles on the property. Many also expressed significant frustration about the lack of riding opportunities in the area. Some noted that there are many opportunities in Sauk County for people pursuing lower-impact activities, but few if any for motorized users. Although some people noted that the property's history as a former munitions plant made it a logical place for high impact uses, the existing features of the property (and specifically in the "Special Use Zone") were not mentioned as being particularly desirable for motorized use. That is, people in support of motorized uses at the SPRA didn't comment that the attributes or features of the site made it a particularly good fit, rather they noted the high demand for motorized use opportunities in southern Wisconsin and that the property's general location was desirable. Some people suggested that more of the property should be devoted to motorized uses than just the Special Use Zone depicted in Conceptual Alternative 3, including a trail around the perimeter. Several noted a specific lack of opportunities to ride off-road motorbikes in the area.

Many also highlighted the economic benefits that motorized use at the SPRA would have on local communities in the form of increased demand for food, gas, hotels, camping, and other supplies. Several people noted that ATV and UTV owners pay registration fees that don't appear to be resulting in increased riding opportunities, again, particularly in southern Wisconsin. Finally, several people promoting motorized use at SPRA were confident that several local riding clubs would be willing to help in the construction and operation of a motorized facility.

People opposing motorized use on the property also cited many reasons. Many felt that motorized use was contrary to the original plan for the property. Many cited the collaborative effort of the Badger Reuse Committee, of which the department was a key member, in developing a consensus plan calling for low-impact recreation. Some questioned why the department included motorized uses in a conceptual alternative at this stage of the planning process.

Many noted a strong opposition to the noise, dust, and erosion that they believed would accompany motorized use. Many expressed a belief that not only would motorized uses affect nearby residents, but visitor experiences in other parts of the SPRA and DLSP would also be significantly diminished. Some stated that motorized use of part of the property would likely prevent people from visiting the property. Some also noted concern that riders would not stay on trails or would attempt to ride on other parts of the SPRA. This was also a concern of the Dairy Forage Research Center, whose property surrounds the proposed Special Use Zone. Finally, some people noted that motorized use was inconsistent with what former landowners who had been displaced wished to see on the property.

Many people stated that motorized use was incompatible with the property because it would damage sensitive ecological habitats and cultural or historic features. Some noted that the area identified as the Special Use Zone in Conceptual Alternative 3 was also identified in the Regional & Property Analysis as an area of critical habitat for grassland birds and questioned how motorized use (and a shooting range) would help protect this group of species, which are experiencing declining populations throughout the state and region.

About three times as many people voiced opposition to motorized use as advocated for motorized use at the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area. In addition, the letters from elected officials and governments expressed concern regarding the proposal to incorporate motorized uses on the property or opposed their inclusion. All of the resolutions passed by local units of government opposed the incorporation of motorized uses on the property.

### Shooting range

As with motorized use, the department's inclusion of a shooting range in one of the conceptual alternatives was met with strong feelings. Those in support cited both the demand for a range and current lack of public shooting ranges in the southern part of the state. People that advocated for including a range at the SPRA saw a demand for various shooting opportunities – from 50 yards to over 1,000 yards. A few people noted that the property has a history of generating loud noises and that a trap range was present on the property when it was owned by the Army. Some people noted that current design standards for shooting ranges ensure safe operation and that ranges help increase safety in the shooting sports by providing opportunities to teach and practice gun safety.

People opposed to including a shooting range at the SPRA noted several reasons. As with motorized use, many believed that a shooting range was inconsistent with the earlier Badger Reuse Plan and deviated from prior department indications to use the SPRA for low-impact recreation uses. Many people noted that the noise level associated with a range would have a negative impact on both surrounding landowners and other visitors. Specific concern was raised that a shooting range would startle horses elsewhere on the property, potentially leading to injuries. As with comments received on motorized use, some suggested that the presence of a shooting range would discourage some people, particularly families with young children, from visiting the property. Several people stated a concern that shooting ranges presented a safety issue for other visitors and neighbors.

Some respondents noted that a significant amount of money had been spent cleaning up munitions-related pollution and that to incorporate a shooting range, which would require periodic lead clean-up, was at odds with past efforts to restore the property. Several people noted that there are a number of clubs in the general area that have various sized ranges that shooters can use. Some questioned whether a public shooting range at SPRA would compete with nearby privately-owned ranges.

About three times as many people voiced opposition to incorporating a shooting range as advocated for a shooting range at the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area. In addition, the letters from elected officials and governments expressed concern regarding the proposal to incorporate a shooting range on the property or opposed its inclusion. All of the resolutions passed by local units of government opposed the incorporation of a shooting range on the property.

#### Equestrian use

Nearly a quarter of comments received requested opportunities for equestrian use of the property. Many people commented that the property appeared well suited to provide trail riding opportunities. Several people noted that there is strong demand for horseback riding and that they would be willing to travel considerable distances to ride at the SPRA. Horse-based camping was also requested, with many folks seeing the SPRA and Devil's Lake State Park together presenting the opportunity to provide high quality riding and camping experiences. Several people suggested that the SPRA also presented a very good opportunity to develop horse cart driving opportunities on the existing road network. People noted high demand in the southern part of the state for cart driving and the current lack of opportunities.

#### Bicycling

Many people advocated for incorporating biking opportunities into the SPRA. Mountain biking in the northern part of the property where there is more topography was requested by many people. Most people interested in mountain biking specifically requested narrow, single-track trails and mentioned that such trails could also be used for snowshoeing in the winter. People felt there was an opportunity to develop enough technically challenging trails at SPRA to draw many visitors.

Many people requested that recreational biking opportunities be incorporated into the property and that the existing network of roads provided a unique opportunity to develop a network of biking trails that could lead people to a variety of historic and cultural sites throughout the property. Such a network, many believed, would be popular and could be connected to Devil's Lake State Park to add to its appeal.

#### Hunting, trapping, and fishing

Although not mentioned by most people, those who did comment on fishing were very supportive of providing shore-based opportunities along the Wisconsin River at the old pumping station. There was modest support for hunting and trapping on the property; however, some commented that such activities should not occur in areas where people were hiking, biking, walking dogs, or horseback riding.

#### Other recreation activities

People supported the other recreation activities mentioned in the conceptual alternatives including hiking, picnicking, and cross country skiing. There was support for creating a canoe/kayak carry-in access site on the Wisconsin River near the old pumping station. Although some people requested limited auto access on the

property, others suggested that a modest “auto trail” that passed by important sites (including the cemeteries) would be popular, especially for people with limited mobility. Camping was suggested by some people, often in conjunction with motorized use or equestrian use of the property. In addition, there were suggestions to include opportunities for rocketry, sports fields and a local recreation center, and archery.

#### HABITAT AND LAND MANAGEMENT

There was strong concurrence in managing the bulk of the property for habitats that existed prior to settlement, namely a range of prairie types as well as oak savanna and oak woodlands. Concern was raised that invasive plant species, particularly shrubs, present a significant management challenge and need to be addressed.

Several people commented that one of the original ideas for the entire former Badger Army Ammunition Plant was to incorporate and research a variety of conservation farming practices in conjunction with habitat management actions. Some expressed disappointment that the conceptual alternatives did not address this opportunity and suggested that the DNR work with the Dairy Forage Research Center on various options.

#### CULTURAL & HISTORICAL RESOURCES AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Nearly everyone who addressed this topic was enthusiastic in support of some aspect of historical or cultural research, preservation and education. Many saw cultural and historical resource management as essential management goals for the property. A frequent message was that future management for cultural history should be compatible with other property goals such as recreation, ecological restoration, or preservation. Comments stated that management of cultural and historical resources should balance, and needn't limit, other goals or uses.

Many discussed and strongly favored a future museum and visitor center to interpret historical and natural history. Some hoped there would be an opportunity to restore and use some of the remaining buildings as educational facilities. A number of comments favored establishing a series of small monuments or memorials to recognize Native American tribes, farmers, and workers at the munitions plant that would be incorporated into trail networks. Similarly, there was a desire to incorporate small markers or signs to explain a variety of topics to visitors including natural history, glacial/geologic features, Tribal cultures and history, the construction and operation of the plant, and historical events. Several people mentioned that the property provided a unique opportunity for youth and school programs.

#### **Next steps:**

The department seeks to develop master plans that are balanced, reasonable and sensible in their approach to habitat management and recreational use. The public's comments, the Regional and Property Analysis, DNR staff technical input, the Badger Reuse Plan, and other considerations will guide the development of the SPRA master plan. In developing the master plan, decisions about future use and management will be made based on:

- the land's resource capability,
- the role of the property in its local and regional context,
- regional recreation supply shortages,
- applicable federal and state laws, administrative DNR Codes, and DNR design standards,
- policies and missions of the DNR,
- consultations with Tribal representatives,
- public input, and
- the professional expertise of DNR managers.

Over the next several months, department staff will flesh out options and approaches to provide different types of recreational experiences and manage different habitats on the property. Staff will also assess the respective impacts, both positive and negative. This will lead to the development of a draft plan, which the department hopes to finish during the Spring of 2014. The department will then present the draft plan and the anticipated impacts to the public for their review and comment. Options considered but not selected will also be presented to the public. Based on public feedback, the department will revise the master plan as needed and present it to the Natural Resources Board for their consideration.