

Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance

Summary Analysis of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Draft Master Plan for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area

September 2015

The Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance's (Alliance) analysis of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' (WDNR) Draft Master Plan (Plan) for the 3,400-acre Sauk Prairie Recreation Area (SPRA) provides a summary of important restoration and recreation issues. The full Plan is extensive and detailed. Only some of the most important issues are considered in this summary.

The Alliance has focused its analysis on the commitments, values and information found in several guiding documents created during the nearly two-decade process of determining the re-use of the former 7,400-acre Badger Army Ammunition Plant. While these guiding documents are lengthy, the three critical statements below encapsulate the guidance for the entire Plan.

- 2001 Final Report of the Badger Reuse Committee (also known as the Badger Reuse Plan)

"The conversion of the Badger lands provides remarkable opportunities for the protection, enhancement, use, restoration, and enjoyment of the property's unique natural and cultural features. In its work, the BRC has sought to highlight these opportunities and to achieve a realistic, community consensus vision for realizing them." And "The Badger property is [to be] managed as a single unit. The managers and owners of land and activities have an affirmative, formal obligation and written agreement to manage the property collaboratively and holistically, and to empower local stakeholders in identifying, discussing, and influencing major management and long-term use decisions."

- 2004 WDNR's application for lands at Badger under the National Park Service's "Federal Lands to Parks" program

"Many groups with varying interests in Badger share a common goal with WDNR to convert it to a recreational property with low impact recreation (hiking, picnicking, primitive camping), prairie, savanna and grassland restoration, environmental education and cultural/historical interpretation with potential for an education center."

- 2012 WDNR's Regional and Property Analysis: Sauk Prairie Recreation Area

"Based on this report's findings, the best overall functional role for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area is to fulfill the highlighted ecological opportunities available while maximizing compatible recreation opportunities. This approach also takes into consideration the nine key values identified in the Badger Reuse Plan, approved by the Sauk County Board in 2001."

Based on these commitments, the main criteria considered in analyzing the WDNR's Plan for the SPRA are:

- the restoration, enhancement and enjoyment of the cultural and natural features of the Badger lands;*
- all Badger lands be, as much as possible, cooperatively managed as a single property by the landowners;*
- the recreational uses of the Badger lands be low-impact in nature; and*
- the recreational uses of the Badger lands be compatible with the restoration of the land.*

WDNR's Plan contains proposals for **restoration** of the land as well as **recreation** on the landscape. These two major land uses are intertwined throughout the Plan. While these are often compatible, there are some proposals in the Plan that may be incompatible and/or lead to user-conflicts.

In general the proposal for **restoration** work is well-defined and well done. WDNR is to be commended for its commitment to the restoration of this land and creating the necessary partnerships to accomplish it. When completed in fifty years, almost all of the land will be restored to native prairie, savanna and oak woodland communities.

The **recreation** proposals in the Plan provide for a range of appropriate low-impact opportunities, including hiking and bicycling, and a limited road network to allow visitors to travel to the major features throughout the property. Although the previously considered ATV trails and shooting range are not included in this Plan, it now includes rocketry and dual-sport motorcycles on bicycle and equestrian trails. While the Plan limits these activities to certain number of days, they remain incompatible with low-impact recreation. Additionally, a planned "special events staging area" and associated "special use permits" may lead to exclusive and incompatible uses and user conflicts.

Compatible with Restoration and Low-impact Recreation:

Long-term restoration of the land to a prairie and savanna landscape.

Conservation agriculture in the restoration process.

Public education and interpretation of the natural and cultural history of the Badger lands.

A limited road network that allows access to important sites within the SPRA, but keeps large roadless parcels.

Incompatible with Restoration and Low-impact Recreation:

Dual-sport motorcycles are not low-impact recreation, even on a limited basis.

Model and High Power Rocketry is not a low-impact recreational activity due to noise, safety and possible contaminants.

A shooting range should not again be considered for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area.

Suggested Improvements for Compatibility with Restoration and Recreation:

Recommendation: *Develop a full hiking trail network accessing all parts of the SPRA property.*

- The Plan includes only one five-mile hiking trail from the proposed visitor center at the middle of the property to the northern edge of SPRA. WDNR's own research confirms a vast majority of outdoor recreation is in the form of walking and hiking. More hiking trails which reach all areas of the property are needed at SPRA.

Recommendation: *Develop specific definitions, procedures and criteria for what low-impact activities will be allowed as special events at the SPRA.*

- The Plan includes a special events staging area and allows for special events which may entail exclusive use of some or all of the SPRA lands for up to five four-day weekends per year, as well as an unknown number of additional days. This exclusive use of the property could lead to significant user-conflicts. New criteria should be added to the Plan, an analysis of potential impacts and user-conflicts should be included, and limited exclusive use of the property should be ensured. The procedures for approving special events should include a range of expertise beyond the property manager alone.

Recommendation: *Limit hunting season in the SPRA from November 15 to May 1.*

- Hunting within the SPRA is proposed to include all hunting seasons from mid-October to late-May. This will result in conflicts with low-impact users of the property in the spring and fall seasons. In the adjacent Devil's Lake State Park, some accommodation is made to other users by delaying the beginning of hunting seasons to mid-November.

Recommendation: *Limit dog training to the approved hunting seasons on the SPRA.*

- A 72-acre Class II Dog Training Area is proposed in the southern portion of the Magazine Area. This year-round use, that includes the use of firearms, poses a conflict with rare grassland birds breeding in the area. There are also potential conflicts with other users in this area and with adjoining land owners.

Recommendation: *Create a more equitable balance between recreational and habitat/native community management areas.*

- The Management Area designations within the SPRA are primarily recreational use (62%) rather than habitat or native community management (34%). Only 17 acres, 0.5

percent of the property, are classified as a Native Community Management Area. This demonstrates a disproportionate emphasis on recreation over habitat management.

Recommendation: *Plan a snowmobile trail along the perimeter of the property, keeping motorized recreation out of the interior of the property.*

- Snowmobiles are a high-impact recreational activity, and should be kept out of the interior of the property. Two proposed routes for snowmobiles are offered in the Plan, one along the eastern perimeter, the other on the Great Sauk Trail (GST). The perimeter route closely follows a long-used route on private land and it has been supported by both the Badger Oversight and Management Commission and snowmobile interests. Snowmobiles on the Great Sauk Trail could severely impede other winter uses on the GST and disrupt the quiet sports opportunities within the SPRA.

Additional General Concerns

Recommendation: *Collaborate with all landowners at Badger to craft a cohesive and comprehensive management plan for all of the 7,400 acres of Badger lands, and plan for a shared visitor center.*

- The 2001 Badger Reuse Plan, to which the WDNR is a signatory, very specifically stated that the Badger lands, whoever the eventual owners might be, should be managed as a single, cohesive property. In its application to the National Park Service, the WDNR stated it would plan for the entire Badger lands and not just their own portion of the property. WDNR's Plan for the SPRA is a stand-alone document that includes few references to the plans of other Badger landowners, and it does not describe how WDNR will coordinate with other landowners on recreation-based management. The most obvious omission is lack of consideration for a combined visitor center/museum to serve visitors of all of the Badger lands.

Recommendation: *The EIS needs to be greatly expanded to demonstrate that potential short-term and cumulative impacts of proposed recreational activities have been thoroughly evaluated. A process needs to be identified for mitigating future impacts, including multiple-user conflicts, soil erosion, noise abatement and other similar impacts.*

- While entitled a Draft Master Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, the impact statement portion of the document is weak and offers limited evaluation of the short-term and cumulative impacts of the proposed recreational activities, including mountain biking and horse riding (soil erosion and invasive species). Potential multiple-user conflicts are not addressed. For example, many users will come to the SPRA for the enjoyment of silence and solitude in an open space, but many of the proposed recreational activities have inherent noise levels that could intrude on those visitors' experiences.

Recommendation: *Provide details of the anticipated cost of implementing the Plan and the anticipated funding sources.*

- Limited information concerning the expected costs of implementing the Plan is found in various places in the Plan, but is not clearly summarized in any one place. There is almost no summary of what the anticipated costs of restoration might be. Particularly in light of the current limited funding for WDNR projects, it is important to understand overall costs associated with the proposed work over the life of the Plan and anticipated funding sources.

The entire Draft Master Plan along with a public comment sheet and online questionnaire can be found on the WDNR's website at:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/Lands/masterplanning/SaukPrairie/>

PUBLIC HEARING on DRAFT MASTER PLAN:

Thursday, September 10

River Arts Center, 105 Ninth Street, Prairie du Sac

4:00pm to 5:00pm : Public Open House (exhibit by DNR)

5:00pm – presentation by DNR

5:15pm to 8:00pm: Public Comment Period*

*Depending on the size of the audience, public comments may be limited to two or three minutes per person.

Public comments on the Draft Master Plan for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area are due to WDNR by Friday, September 25, 2015.

Additional comments on the Draft Master Plan for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area can be found on the Alliance's website at **www.saukprairievision.org**. The Alliance's full Response to WDNR on the Draft Master Plan will be available sometime after the WDNR's Public Hearing on the Plan on September 10.