

Crow Wing County Land Services Department

Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan and High Conservation Value Forest Assessment

*Year One Outcomes & Recommendations*

Draft for Public Review

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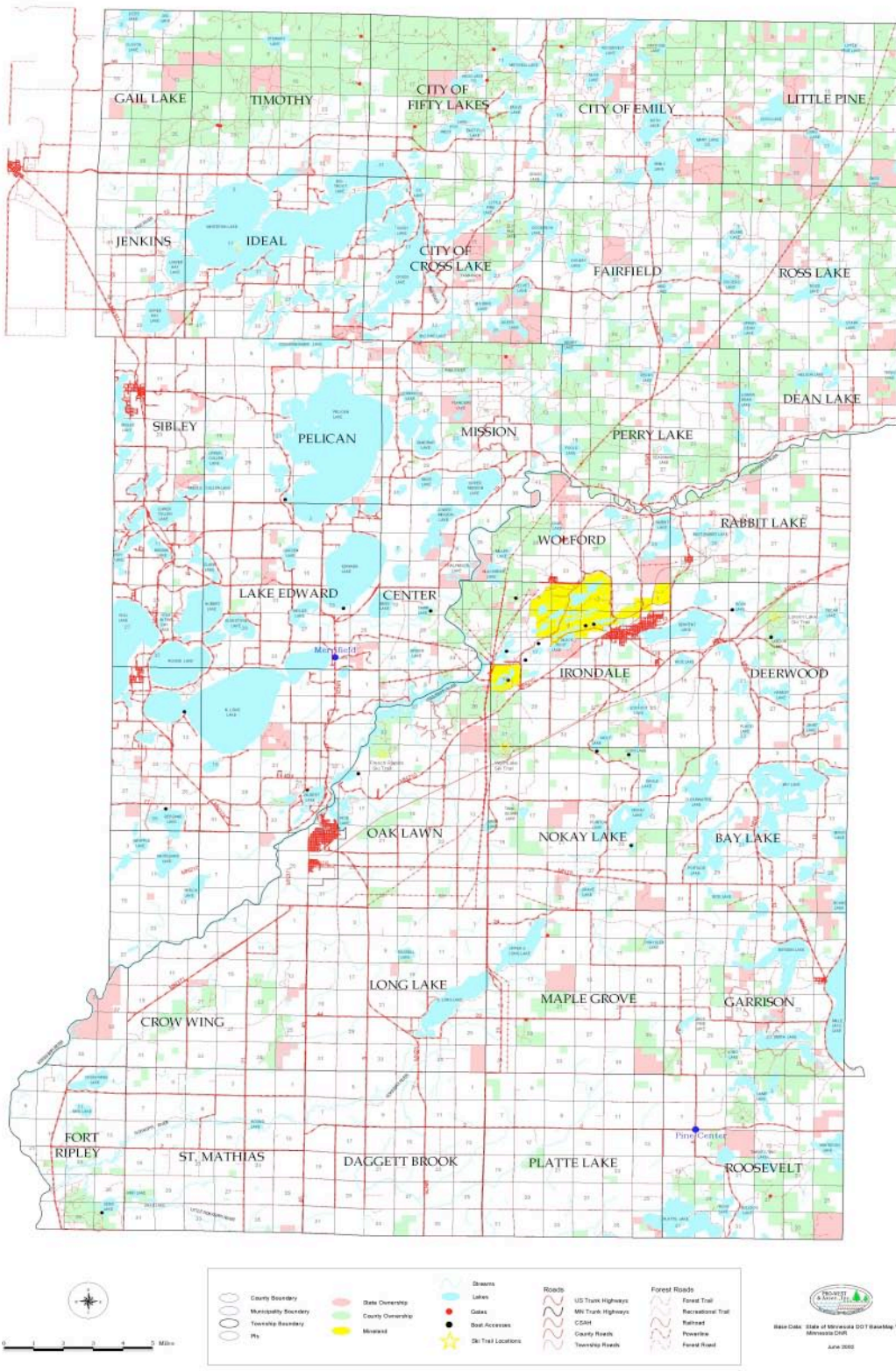
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# Crow Wing County



## Introduction

The comprehensive recreation trails plan addresses priorities for the management of diverse recreation trails and trail opportunities on the lands managed by the Crow Wing County Land Services Department's Public Land Management office.

The Crow Wing County's Public Land Management is responsible for the management of 103,000 acres of tax-forfeit lands in the county. These lands are distributed throughout the county (Figure 1).

The lands managed by Public Land Management reflect Crow Wing County's location at the transition zone of ecological divisions. Crow Wing County includes a region of Minnesota where the overall forested land is relatively low, where the quality of agricultural land is good, and where the demand for private land ownership has remained consistent over the years.

The public land picture in Crow Wing County is radically different than that for adjacent counties to the north and east. In Crow Wing County there is no significant federal land ownership and no national forestland. State ownership in Crow Wing County is limited as well. There is not enough state-owned land within the county to warrant individual management plans. Crow Wing County tax forfeited land is the dominant public ownership category. More than 10% of Crow Wing's tax forfeited lands involve undivided interests in which the County shares ownership with one or more other private parties. In nearly every case, this situation renders it impossible for the County (or the private parties) to manage or develop the land. The diverse demands for multiple uses on public lands increases management pressures on the county-managed lands.

The lands managed by the Crow Wing County Land Services Department already provide many recreation trail services. Trails provided on county-managed lands include opportunities for hiking, biking, snowmobiling, cross country skiing, off-highway motorcycles (OHMs), all-terrain vehicles, (ATVs), equestrian trails, canoe routes, and other forms of recreation. The different types of trails and existing miles of trails are listed in Table 1. In addition to existing trails, the county maintains several other recreation facilities and services, including lake accesses and parks (Table 2).

The comprehensive recreation trails planning process focuses only on the recreation trails and facilities under the direct management of the Crow Wing County Land Services Department Public Land Management office. This document reports the outcomes of year one of the plan development process and focuses on near-term priorities for addressing trails management considerations on these lands.

**Table 1. Existing Recreation Trails Managed by Crow Wing County Land Services**

Category	Trail Name	Length/Area
<i>Non-Motorized Trails - Summer</i>		
	Wolf Lake Multi-Purpose Trail System	6.6 miles/400 acres
	Larson Lake Forest Recreational Area	7.5 miles/760 acres
	Blueberry Bog Trail Area	8.7 miles/1,000 acres
	Thompson Creek/Cranberry Bog	4.4 miles/2,000 acres
	Pine Ridge Non-Motorized Area	4.1 miles/440 acres
	Rock Creek Non-Motorized Area	1.8 miles/280 acres
	White Pine Non-Motorized Area	3.0 miles/320 acres
	Scrub Oak Trail	6.1 miles/1,000 acres
	Rice Lake Trail	1.6 miles/200 acres
	Poor Farm County/State Cooperative Wildlife Mgmt	2.9 miles/314 acres
	French Rapids Trails	5.8 miles/400 acres
	Fort Ripley Non-Motorized Area	1.5 miles/40 acres
	Maple Grove, Section 4	2.0 miles/120 acres
<i>Non-Motorized Trails - Winter</i>		
	Wolf Lake Multi-Purpose Trail System	6.6 miles/400 acres
	Larson Lake Forest Recreational Area	7.5 miles/760 acres
	French Rapids Trails	5.8 miles/400 acres
	Maple Grove, Section 4	2.0 miles/120 acres
	Pequot Lakes Ski Trail	1.38 miles
<i>Motorized Trails - Summer</i>		
	Pine Center Grant-in-aid ATV Trail	11 miles/1,600 miles
	Fort Ripley Grant-in-aid ATV Trail	7 miles/880 acres
	Northern Lites Off-Highway Motorcycle Trail	6.5 miles/500 acres
	Emily-Outing Trail	5 miles/1,000 acres
<i>Motorized Trails - Winter</i>		
	Baxter Snowmobile Club	47 miles
	Brainerd Snowdeos Snowmobile Club, Inc.	104 miles
	Cuyuna Range Snowmobile Trails	85 miles
	Fort Ripley North Country Trail Busters	58 miles
	Snowbirds Snowmobile Club	44 miles
	Garrison Commercial Club	65 miles
	Gull Lake Drifters, Inc.	34 miles
	IdealSno Pros Snowmobile Club	107 miles
	Merrifield Marathons Snowmobile Club	52 miles
	Paul Bunyan Trail CWC Snowmobile Association	26 miles
	Cass County Trails	4 miles
<i>Water Trails</i>		
	Pine River Canoe Route	---
	Mississippi River East	---
	Mississippi River Central	---
	Mississippi River Brainerd	---
	Mississippi River South	---
	Portage Lake	---

**Table 2. Recreational Facilities Managed by Crow Wing County Land Services**

<i>Public Lake Access</i>	
	Black Lake Access
	Butternut Lake Access
	Fawn Lake Access
	French Rapids Access
	Gilbert Lake Access
	Jones Bay Access
	Little Rabbit Lake & Rowe Mine Pit Access
	Loon Lake Access
	Red Sand Lake Access
	Sebie Lake
	Section Six Mine Pit Access
	South Pelican Lake Access
	Wolf Lake Access
<i>Parks</i>	
	County Island Park on Rush Lake
	Milford Mine Memorial Park
	South Long Lake Community Park
<i>Bird Watching Area</i>	
	Northland Arboretum

Sources of information for Tables 1 and 2: State Health Improvement Plan, Recreational Facilities Inventory 2010, Prepared by Region 5 (available at: <http://dovetailinc.org/files/RecFacInventoryCompressed.pdf.zip> ); additional data from the Crow Wing County Land Services Department

In addition to recreation trails and facilities managed by the Crow Wing County Land Services Department, there are additional recreation resources located in Crow Wing County and maintained by other public and private organizations. The Crow Wing County Parks, Trails and Open Space Plan<sup>1</sup> and recent inventory work by Region 5<sup>2</sup> aid in identifying these many diverse resources. The diverse recreation resources in Crow Wing County include resources provided by private businesses and resorts, trails and facilities administered by cities and municipalities and state parks and other services provide by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

<sup>1</sup> Complete plan is available at [http://www.co.crow-wing.mn.us/land/docs/Parks\\_Trails\\_and\\_Open\\_Space\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.co.crow-wing.mn.us/land/docs/Parks_Trails_and_Open_Space_Plan.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> State Health Improvement Plan, Recreational Facilities Inventory 2010, Prepared by Region 5 (available at: <http://dovetailinc.org/files/RecFacInventoryCompressed.pdf.zip> )

## **Process**

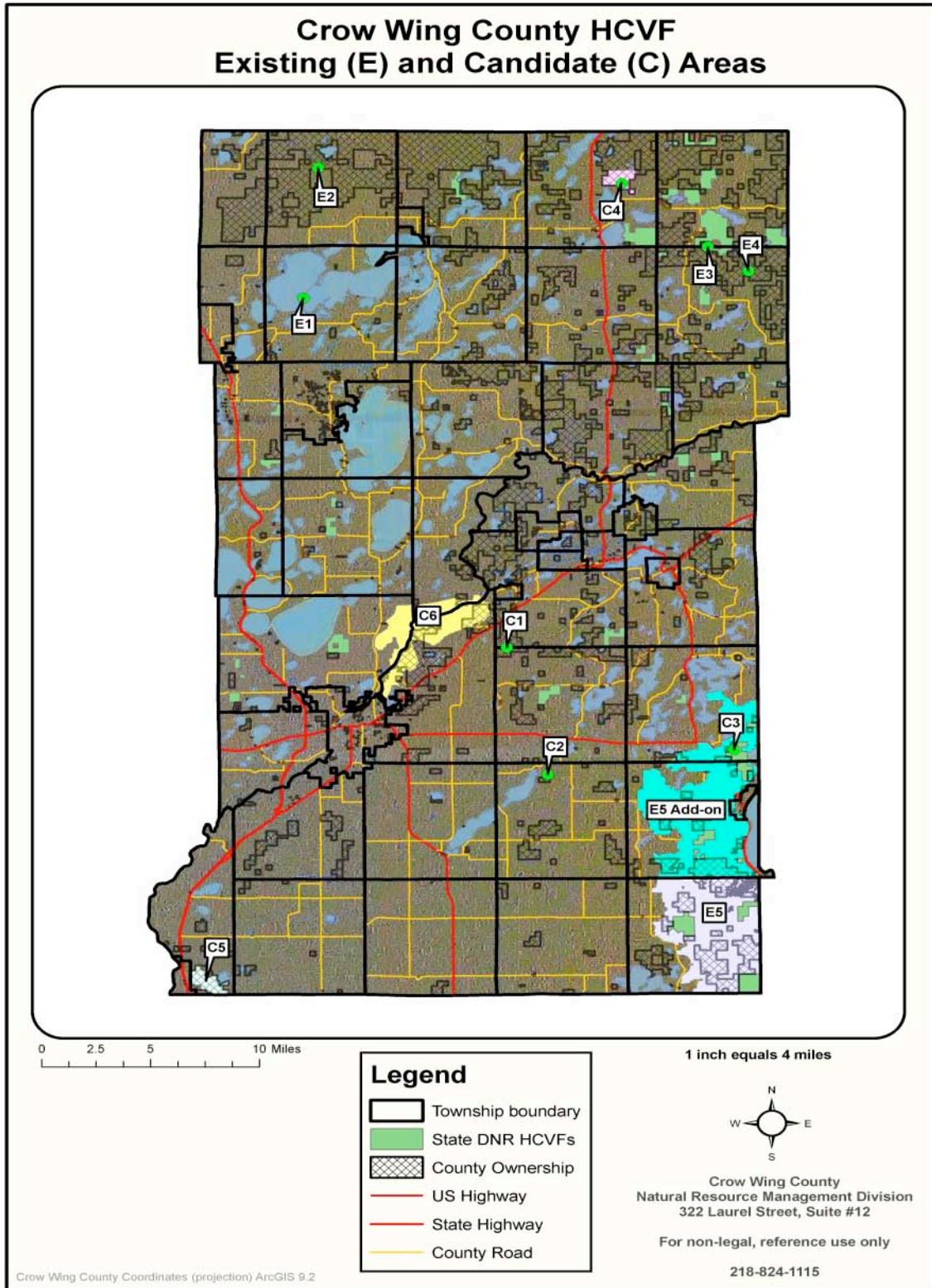
The process for developing this Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan began in October 2009. An Advisory Group was formed to provide input to the project and monthly public meetings were held from March 2010 – December 2010. The plan development process was also informed by the completion of an assessment of High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF) as defined by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification standards that are followed by Public Land Management. The members of the Advisory Group are listed on page 2 and meeting notes from the public meetings are available at the project website and from the Land Services Department.

The first year of the project has focused on information gathering and the public input process for aiding in recreation trails management and planning. The second year of the project will involve implementing the recommendations included in this document and further refinement of the county's trails planning and management activities.

## **The HCVF Assessment**

The outcomes of the High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF) Assessment are included in the following figure (Figure 2) and table (Table 3). The complete HCVF report, including public comments and the response to comments, is available at the project website and from the Land Services Department. The certification auditors will review the outcomes of the assessment for determination of compliance with the FSC certification standards. Because FSC certification is an ongoing process, which includes annual auditing, there are ongoing opportunities to review and update the HCVF designations as new information becomes available or as additional guidance is provided by the FSC standard and policies.

Figure 2.



**Existing High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF) for Crow Wing County Managed Tax-Forfeit Lands  
Crow Wing County Land Services Department**

**Table 3. Summary of EXISTING and CANDIDATE HCVF Areas**

*(all Existing HCVF areas have a Conservation Area Management Plan in place)*

<b>Map Location</b>	<b>Descriptive Name of HCVF Area</b>	<b>Legal Description of Location*</b>	<b>Description of High Conservation Value</b>	<b>Sources of Information Used to Identify HCVF</b>	<b>Size (acres)</b>	<b>Management and/or Monitoring Considerations</b>	<b>Land Services Department recommendation</b>
E1	Big Island	Sec. 17 T.137-R.28	Old Forest; Northern Hardwood Forest	Individuals' concerns/desires. MCBS-outstanding	53 ac	Maintain ecosystem of northern hardwood forest.	Previously identified and approved by the CWC County Board as future old growth site and recommended by Public Land Management staff as HCVF.
E2	Norway Pine Future Old Growth	Sec. 9, T.138-R.28	Future old forest red pine (114 years old in 2010).	Field visit. MCBS - moderate	13 ac	Maintain integrity of mature red pine stand.	Previously identified and approved by the CWC County Board as future old growth site and recommended by Public Land Management staff as HCVF.
E3	Birchdale WMA- N. Hardwoods Future Old Growth	Sec. 33, T.138-R.25 Sec. 4, T.137-R.25	Mature Northern Hardwood	Forest Inventory, Field visit, MCBS - high	52 ac	Maintain integrity of future old-growth hardwood stand.	Previously identified and approved by the CWC County Board as future old growth site and recommended by Public Land Management staff as HCVF.
E4	Ross Lake- N. Hardwoods Future Old Growth	Sec. 11, T.137-R.25	Mature Northern Hardwood	Forest Inventory, Field visit, MCBS-high	40 ac**	Maintain integrity of future old-growth hardwood stand	Previously identified and approved by the CWC County Board as future old growth site and recommended by Public Land Management staff as HCVF.

E5	Red-Shouldered Hawk Habitat Area	Sec. 22-27, 34-35, T. 43-R.28	Red-Shouldered Hawk Habitat	MCBS-outstanding	2650 ac***	Maintain habitat areas for red-shouldered hawk.	Recommend for HCVF by Public Land Management staff for its outstanding rating from the Minnesota County Biological Survey.
C1	Wolf Lake Ski Trail System	Sec. 6, T.45-R.29 Sec. 31, T.46-R.29	Large diameter red and white pine trees.	Individuals concerns/desires.	64 ac	Maintain large diameter red and white pine trees.	This site does not meet tree age requirement for HCVF. Defer designation and continue to monitor as candidate HCVF during annual management review.
C2	Maple Grove Twp - Upper So. Long Lake	Sec. 4, T.44-R.29	107 year old red and white pine stand. Watershed protection	Individuals concerns/desires. MCBS - moderate	37 ac	Maintain integrity of stand consisting of mature red and white pine trees.	This site does not meet tree age requirement for HCVF. Defer designation and continue to monitor as candidate HCVF during annual management review.
C3	Bay Lake Twp -Round Lake	Sec. 35, T.45-R.28	Mature Northern Hardwood	Adjacent DNR lands. MCBS - high	84 ac	Maintain integrity of stand consisting of large diameter hardwoods.	Defer designation and continue monitoring during annual management review. No change in existing forest management
C4	City of Emily White Cedar Wetlands	Sec. 14, 15, 23 T.138-R.26	Old white cedar trees within forested wetlands.	Forest Inventory, MCBS-high	198 ac	Maintain integrity of stand(s) consisting of white cedar within forested wetlands.	Defer designation and continue monitoring during annual management review. No change in existing forest management.

C5	Sebie Lake Oak Mgmt. Area	Sec. 26, 35, 36 T. 43-R.32	Social resource of oak forest (hunting, recreation).	Forest Inventory, Social history of area	590 ac	Management of oak resource for social values.	Remove as a candidate. Site does not meet HC VF definition; no change in existing forest management.
C6	Mississippi River Riparian Area	Sec. 4, T.134-R.27 Sec. 24, 27, 33 T. 46-R.30	Riparian and Archeological protection.	Natural Heritage & Archeological databases	189 ac	Protect riparian and archeological features.	Remove as a candidate. Site does not meet HC VF definition. The protection of riparian and archeological features are covered by existing policies and procedures for riparian and archeological sites

\* Some location details may be omitted to protect confidential or at risk information.

\*\*Possible expansion of HC VF into adjacent forested wetlands (lowland conifer and lowland hardwoods) encompassing 300 additional acres of forested wetlands.

\*\*\* Possible expansion of HC VF into neighboring tax-forfeited areas (Garrison and Bay Lake Twps.) encompassing 4800 additional acres of forest habitat.

## **Planning Recommendations**

There are two types of recommendations included within this document. The “Recommendations for Specific Forms of Recreation Trails” are narrowly focused and address targeted activities for specific user groups. The Major Recommendations include action items that address more than one form of recreation and address needs at a broader management level. The recommendations were developed within the context of a 1-3 year timeframe.

The first year of the project has focused on information gathering and the public input process for aiding in recreation trails management and planning. The second year of the project will involve implementing the recommendations included in this document and further refinement of the county’s trails planning and management activities.

## **Recommendations for Specific Forms of Recreation Trails**

### ***Non-Motorized Summer Trails***

Crow Wing County offers non-motorized summer trails that are available for equestrian riders, hiking, mountain biking, hunting and other uses (Table 1). Many of these routes are also available for non-motorized winter uses. The routes are mowed (e.g., twice per year) and the county receives positive feedback from users. Opportunities for improvement include trail signs, online information access and maintenance.

The following strategic priorities for managing summer non-motorized recreation trails were identified through the planning process. Additional suggestions were recorded in the meeting notes. The following short list was selected with the goal of identifying top priorities and first steps for managing this form of recreation.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Collect visitor and trail usage information (also see Major Recommendation)
- Improve mountain biking opportunities through trail maintenance (e.g., mowing)
- Improve access to trail information (also see Major Recommendation)
- Improve trails by extending their length, providing trail heads and facilities and improving maps

## ***Non-Motorized Winter Trails***

Crow Wing County offers non-motorized winter trails (Table 1). Uses of these trails include primarily cross-country skiing. There is also interest in snowshoeing, winter hiking, dog sledding and other activities. Active ski clubs support the trails and assist with maintenance. The cross-country ski trails in Crow Wing County are recognized as being well designed and among the best in the state. Opportunities for improvement include consistent grooming, trail condition information, and maps and information to promote trail use.

The following strategic priorities for managing winter non-motorized recreation trails were identified through the planning process. Additional suggestions were recorded in the meeting notes. The following short list was selected with the goal of identifying top priorities and first steps for managing this form of recreation.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Collect visitor and trail usage information (also see Major Recommendation)
- Improve access to trail condition information (also see Major Recommendation)
- Collaborate to re-establish or expand trails (e.g., working with Cass County and at Crosslake)
- Develop County plan and budget for maintenance, grooming, and marketing trails
- Designate multi-use snowshoe trails

## ***Motorized Summer Trails***

Crow Wing County offers motorized summer trails that are available for Off-Highway Motorcycles (OHMs) and other Off-Highway Vehicles (OHVs, ATVs) (Table 1). Trails include utilizing existing logging roads and active clubs support the trails and assist with maintenance. Opportunities for improvement include identifying routes that meet user group needs while addressing concerns from other stakeholders, monitoring trail use and conditions, and addressing enforcement.

The following strategic priorities for managing summer motorized recreation trails were identified through the planning process. Additional suggestions were recorded in the meeting notes. The following short list was selected with the goal of identifying top priorities and first steps for managing this form of recreation.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Take action based on criteria, data, and comprehensive planning (also see Major Recommendation)
- Provide an objective evaluation process for trail proposals (also see Major Recommendation)
- Address enforcement, monitoring, safety and damage repair
- Review forest road uses and designations for additional trail potentials (e.g., Black Bear area)
- Development of a motorized vehicle use classification for county forest roads and trails (i.e., Managed, Limited or Closed classifications)

## ***Motorized Winter Trails***

Crow Wing County offers an extensive system of motorized winter trails that are available for snowmobiling. These trails cross county-managed lands as well as other public and private lands where landowners provide trail easements. Active clubs support the trails and assist with maintenance. The snowmobile trails in Crow Wing County are recognized as being among the best in Minnesota. The trails have been located through the use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and a system for supporting emergency responders has been established. Opportunities for improvement include trail connections to local businesses, continuation of trail easements and updated maps and trail condition information.

The following strategic priorities for managing winter motorized recreation trails were identified through the planning process. Additional suggestions were recorded in the meeting notes. The following short list was selected with the goal of identifying top priorities and first steps for managing this form of recreation.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Maintain quality of existing trail system through continued good management and oversight
- Maintain active clubs/volunteers
- Explore incentives for land owners to provide trail easements

## ***Water Trails***

There are a number of river trails in Crow Wing County as well as lake accesses (Tables 1 and 2). The trails traverse county-managed lands as well as other public and private lands and include public waterways. The Crow Wing County area is well known as an area with abundant lakes and water resources. Opportunities for improvement include public access to information about water trails, updating maps, promoting the historical nature of the water trails and re-establishing portage routes.

The following strategic priorities for managing water trails were identified through the planning process. Additional suggestions were recorded in the meeting notes. The following short list was selected with the goal of identifying top priorities and first steps for managing this form of recreation.

### **Strategic Priorities**

- Pursue reestablishment of Rabbit River Portage and increase public awareness of local history
- Update maps in collaboration with the Mississippi Headwaters Board
- Improve access to maps and promote water trails as part of region's water-based recreation interests
- Collect data on water trail usage (also see Major Recommendation)
- Inventory existing routes, facilities and access points to identify opportunities for improvement

## **Major Recommendations**

The following list of Major Recommendations were identified in the planning process and include action items that address more than one form of recreation and address needs at a broader management level. These recommendations address the development management tools. The recommendations are developed with a 1-3 year timeframe.

### ***Review the Trail Planning Process***

To ensure a consistent process that is well understood by staff and the public, it is recommended that the process of trail planning be reviewed and modified as appropriate.

Considerations in the review could include:

- Definition(s) of who (e.g., individuals, organizations, etc) is eligible to nominate or propose trails and the nomination or proposal process
- Designation of trail nomination schedules (e.g., if trail proposals will be accepted on an on-going basis and/or at certain times or intervals)
- Public notification process (including when the public is notified, how notification occurs and opportunities for public input)
- Process for demonstrating support for the proposed trail and evaluation of capacities to construct and maintain the trail
- Decision-making process

### ***Identify Benchmarking Metrics for Recreation Trails***

To better understand current conditions and trends, it is recommended that a review of existing data regarding recreation trails be conducted to identify known baseline information and gaps in baseline information. The information should be as specific to Crow Wing County as possible. The outcome of this review would be the selection of key indicators to be periodically monitored as a means to measure recreation trends and inform recreation trails management and planning.

Possible metrics to be reviewed and monitored could include:

- Trail user counts (from sign-in sheets, surveys of parking areas, trail ambassador reports, etc)
- Reports of Safety Concerns or Violations (as reported by Conservation Officers, sheriffs department, etc)
- License and registration numbers
- Club memberships or other measures of user group participation
- Other surveys or data collected by Crow Wing County or other organizations

## ***Develop a Decision Making Matrix for Trail Planning***

To ensure a consistent and well-understood process for identifying compatible recreation trail types for specific areas of county-managed lands, it is recommended that a set of criteria be developed for evaluating trail proposals and to improve trail planning and design. The criteria should be designed to inform a thoughtful evaluation process with flexibility to address the diversity of situations that do and can exist.

Criteria to consider within the evaluation and planning tool could include:

- Environmental considerations, including soil types, slopes or grades, wildlife habitats, water resources, plant populations, etc.
- Co-benefits of trails (e.g., recreation and commuter uses, wildlife viewing opportunities along trails, etc.)
- Size and location of the county-managed parcels
- Compatibility with existing land uses and trails
- Water use and access impacts
- Trail proximity to amenities, services, private residences and other landscape considerations
- Collaborative trail planning and maintenance opportunities (e.g., with private businesses or resorts, adjacent property owners, user groups or clubs, etc)

For reviewing new trail proposals, an impact assessment using the criteria in the matrix could be developed. The trail planning process should include guidance for who is responsible for evaluating the potential impacts and for preparing any recommended mitigations for potential impacts. This assessment would be separate from any required Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process

## ***Support Public Access to Recreation Trails Information***

There is an abundance of recreation trail opportunities in Crow Wing County and the surrounding area. Some of these trails are under the direct management of the Crow Wing County Public Land Management office, but many additional trails and recreation facilities are managed by other private and public organizations. Efforts have been on going within Crow Wing County to develop “one-stop” information resources. The work of Region 5, the Chamber of Commerce and many other organizations provides opportunities to address this public information need. It is recommend that Public Land Management continue to support and participate in these information gathering efforts and look for opportunities to provide website links to resources and to promote and share recreation information with the many regional partners that have a shared interest in the quality recreation opportunities of the region. In addition to making information available online and at websites, it is also important to seek ways to make hardcopies of maps and other information accessible to the public.

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For more information about this project:

<http://www.dovetailinc.org/content/crow-wing-county-recreation>