

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.

Draft Recommendations

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

Major Recommendations

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

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 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. 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 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 new trail proposals an impact assessment using the criteria in the matrix could be developed. The trail planning process would need to include guidance for who is responsible for evaluating the potential impacts and 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 ongoing 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 recommended 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 quality recreation opportunities. 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.

Recommendations for Specific Forms of Recreation Trails

Summer Non-Motorized (e.g., hiking, walking, biking, etc)

Strategic Priorities

- Develop visitor use 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

Winter Non-Motorized (e.g., skiing, dog-sledding, etc)

Strategic Priorities

- Develop visitor use 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

Summer Motorized (e.g., ATVs, OHMs, etc)

Strategic Priorities

- Take action based on criteria, data, and comprehensive plan (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)

Winter Motorized (e.g., snowmobiles, etc)

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 (e.g., canoe, boats, etc)

Strategic Priorities

- Pursue reestablishment of Rabbit River Portage and 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