

Sand Dunes State Forest Public Engagement Project

Report prepared by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for
the 2017 Minnesota Legislature

In fulfillment of 2016 Minnesota Session Law Chapter 189 Section 47

Submitted January 13, 2017



Contents of This Report

Process Background	1
Purpose	1
History and Context	1
State Forest Purpose.....	1
Sand Dunes State Forest Operational Plan Developed.....	1
Relevant Legislation	2
MN Session Law Ch.189 Sec. 47.....	2
M.S. 89.002 Sub. 1 – Forest Resource Management Policy	2
DNR Project Team.....	3
Formation of the Stakeholder Advisory Group.....	4
Meeting Structure.....	4
Feedback Processing and Communication	4
What We Heard	5
Land cover decisions and impacts to environment/biodiversity.....	5
Harvest techniques	5
Impacts to public/personal enjoyment.....	5
Health and safety concerns.....	6
Short- and long-term fate of Permanent School Trust lands.....	6
Key Changes DNR is Making Based on Public Feedback	7
Next Steps in the Public Engagement Process.....	8
Revisions to the operational plan	8
Ongoing role of the Stakeholder Advisory Group.....	8
Ongoing communication strategies.....	8
Appendix A: Project Documentation	9
Appendix B: Stakeholder Meeting Dates and Topics	10
Appendix C: Stakeholder Advisory Group Membership	11
Appendix D: Public Engagement Project Process Evaluation	12

Estimated cost of writing this report: \$3,650

Process Background

Purpose

The Sand Dunes State Forest Public Engagement Project was created to encourage dialogue and collaboration between the DNR and citizens, nearby residents, and other potentially affected local and statewide stakeholders about management of the Sand Dunes State Forest (SDSF). The goal was to provide opportunities for stakeholders to receive information, collaborate on issues, and provide input that would assist DNR in fulfilling its statutory responsibility to make management decisions for SDSF.

History and Context

State Forest Purpose

As with all of Minnesota's state forests, SDSF is managed for multiple benefits, including production of timber and other forest products, providing outdoor recreation, protecting watersheds, and perpetuating rare and distinctive species of native flora and fauna. The state forest consists of 6,000 state-owned acres located in Orrock Township, Sherburne County in west-central Minnesota. About 2,400 acres are managed tree plantations (mostly conifers). SDSF hosts a variety of recreational opportunities, including a recreational campground, a horse campground, and 29 miles of maintained trails, as well as a nearly 700-acre Scientific and Natural Area.

SDSF contains a number of rare geologically and ecologically significant features. Sand dune formations are rare in Minnesota, and the dune fields in SDSF are the largest and best formed dunes remaining in the state. The dune ecosystem within the state forest supports a diverse array of native plant communities as well as a number of rare plant and animal species of conservation concern. There are four globally imperiled native plant communities within the SDSF, five sites ranked by the Minnesota County Biological Survey (MCBS) as having outstanding biodiversity significance, and six MCBS sites ranked as having high biodiversity. The Dry Oak Barrens Savanna native plant community is considered the most imperiled native plant community in the Midwest, occupying approximately 0.02% of its pre-European settlement extent. To date, five state-listed species of plants and nine state-listed species of animals have been documented in the SDSF, and these species depend upon the open dry prairie and savanna habitats that occur in the dunes area. Oak woodland and associated wetland habitat also support a number of rare species.

Sand Dunes State Forest Operational Plan Developed

In February 2013, an operational plan for management of SDSF was released as an appendix to the Anoka Sand Plain Subsection Forest Resource Management Plan (SFRMP). The operational plan was created to provide direction to field managers when developing site-specific management. It was created jointly by the MNDNR divisions of Forestry, Ecological & Water Resources, and Fish & Wildlife because of the exceptional rare and distinct ecological and geological features that occur within SDSF. The plan had undergone 30-day public review as part of the SFRMP review process.

The plan divides SDSF into five management zones: 1) long-term forest management (2,862 acres), 2) Uncas Dunes Scientific and Natural Area (676 acres), 3) immediate rare features management (513 acres), 4) eventual rare features management (1,328 acres), and 5) Bob Dunn Recreation Area (353 acres).

The 2013 operational plan focuses largely on strategic direction for vegetation management in SDSF. It calls for a shift in focus from timber management to rare features management in zones 3, 4, and parts of 5 (1,959 acres total), and for increased timber species diversity in zone 1 and the remaining areas of zone 5 (3,099 acres total). Management goals for zone 2 and recreational management goals across SDSF remain largely unchanged.

The operational plan also calls for outreach efforts to inform the public about the shift in management direction.

Relevant Legislation

M.S. 89A - Sustainable Forest Resources

Section 89A.02 of Minnesota Statute describes the state's policy regarding sustainable forest resources, including:

- “(1) pursue the sustainable management, use, and protection of the state's forest resources to achieve the state's economic, environmental, and social goals;
- (2) encourage cooperation and collaboration between public and private sectors in the management of the state's forest resources;
- (3) recognize and consider forest resource issues, concerns, and impacts at the site level and landscape level; and
- (4) recognize the broad array of perspectives regarding the management, use, and protection of the state's forest resources, and establish and maintain processes and mechanisms that seek and incorporate these perspectives in the planning and management of the state's forest resources.”

M.S. 89.002 Sub. 1 – Forest Resource Management Policy

The commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is required to manage state forests “according to the principles of multiple use and sustained yield”:

“The commissioner shall manage the forest resources of state forest lands under the authority of the commissioner according to the principles of multiple use and sustained yield. The forest resource management policy shall not supersede any existing duty or authority of the commissioner in managing forest lands, but the duties and authorities, as far as practicable, shall be exercised consistently with this policy. The forest resource management policy is not intended to exclude extractive uses of forest lands under the authority of the commissioner pursuant to state law.”

M.S. 89.012 – Unit Forest Resource Plans

Minnesota Statute provides authority for the Commissioner of the DNR to develop unit forest plans to guide forest management on state lands. DNR carries out this authority via Subsection and Section Forest Resources Management Plans (SFRMPs). As mentioned previously, the SDSF operational plan was created as a component of one of these SFRMPs.

“Each geographic administrative unit of the Division of Forestry identified by the commissioner as an appropriate unit for forest resource planning shall have a unit forest resource plan which is consistent with the forest resource management policy and plan, including state reforestation

and road policies. [...] A unit plan shall set forth the specific goals and objectives for the management, protection, development, and production of forest resources in the administrative unit. A unit plan shall be integrated with other uses not managed under the multiple use, sustained yield principles policy when those uses have been authorized and approved according to law, including compliance with environmental review procedures. Unit plans shall be revised as necessary to remain consistent with the forest resource management plan.

[M.S. 84.0895 – Protection of Threatened and Endangered Species](#)

Minnesota Statute 84.0895 describes regulations protecting Minnesota’s threatened and endangered species. Subdivision 5 outlines the authority of the Commissioner of the DNR to manage threatened and endangered species, including habitat acquisition and maintenance, research, and regulated taking.

“Subd. 5. Management. (a) Notwithstanding any other law, the commissioner may undertake management programs, issue orders, and adopt rules necessary to bring a resident species of wild animal or plant that has been designated as threatened or endangered to a point at which it is no longer threatened or endangered.

(b) Subject to the provisions of subdivision 6, management programs for endangered or threatened species include research, census, law enforcement, habitat acquisition, habitat maintenance, propagation, live trapping, transplantation, and regulated taking.”

[MN Session Law Ch.189 Sec. 47](#)

During the 2016 Legislative session, the Minnesota Legislature passed Chapter 189 Section 47 of Minnesota Session Law, which stated:

“SAND DUNES STATE FOREST REPORT

(a) Until July 1, 2017, the commissioner of natural resources shall not log, enter into a logging contract, or otherwise remove trees for purposes of creating oak savanna in the Previous Sand Dunes State Forest. This paragraph does not prohibit work done under contracts entered into before the effective date of this section or work on school trust lands.

* (b) By January 15, 2017, the commissioner must submit a report, prepared by the Division of Forestry, to the chairs and ranking minority members of the house of representatives and senate committees and divisions with jurisdiction over environment and natural resources with the Division of Forestry's progress on collaborating with local citizens and other stakeholders over the past year when making decisions that impact the landscape, including forest conversions and other clear-cutting activities, and the division's progress on other citizen engagement activities.”

[DNR Project Team](#)

The department assembled an extensive team of DNR leadership and staff to facilitate the public engagement project, with the Division of Forestry leading this effort. The overall project team included a project manager from the Division of Forestry; an executive sponsor team comprised of the Director of the Division of Forestry, the Director of the Division of Ecological and Water Resources, and the Regional Director for central Minnesota; a regional managing sponsor team; a planning team; and a project management team with staff from the Divisions of Forestry, Ecological & Water Resources, Fish & Wildlife, and Parks & Trails. Portions of this overall team met approximately three times each month

during the weeks leading up to each public meeting, and many members, including the Directors, also attended the public meetings.

Formation of the Stakeholder Advisory Group

After an initial meeting with a group of concerned citizens, the project team sought out stakeholders representing a range of local and statewide interests and perspectives related to the operational plan for SDSF. The final group officially contained 29 advisors, 15 of whom were local residents or neighbors to the SDSF. Of the remaining members, 11 were representing statewide interests, 2 were state legislators, and 1 was representing DNR as project manager (Appendix C). (Note: Frequency of participation varied; not all advisors were involved in the process from start to finish.)

Meeting Structure

There were six Stakeholder Advisory Group meetings between June and December 2016. All meetings were open to the public, and audience members were invited to participate and provide verbal and written feedback during meetings as well. In this document, “stakeholders” refers generally to members of the public who participated in the process, including Stakeholder Advisory Group members (“advisors”) as well as audience members.

At the first meeting, stakeholders were asked to identify topics that they wanted to discuss at future meetings. Based on this feedback, main topics for the remaining meetings included: tree and timber management; recreation; wildlife and native plant community management; School Trust Land management; and forestry road-related issues.

Meetings were generally held once per month and were three hours long. Meeting format varied depending on topic, but included combinations of presentations from advisors; DNR/other state agency presentations; question and answer periods with presenters; individual written reflections on discussion questions provided by DNR; small-group discussion around the questions; large-group discussion of concerns, suggestions, feedback, and other ideas; and feedback from DNR on suggestions made during previous meetings. In addition to stakeholders and audience members from the interested public, a variety of DNR staff were present to listen and respond to questions. The meetings were facilitated by a staff person from the Department of Administration.

In addition to these six meetings, a field tour was offered in the fall for interested stakeholders. Nineteen stakeholders attended one of two tours offered by DNR staff on October 22, 2016. The tour took stakeholders to several sites in and nearby SDSF to demonstrate timber management and oak savanna management practices and to discuss management options for the Ann Lake campground.

Feedback Processing and Communication

Written feedback was processed after each meeting and included in a meeting summary, which was distributed to stakeholders. Suggestions and questions were evaluated and discussed by staff, and responses were developed. These summaries were shared with stakeholders and key decision points were reviewed at subsequent meetings. Summaries, answers to questions, and other resources are also stored on a [public webpage](#) designed for the process.

What We Heard

While stakeholders expressed a wide range of concerns related to the 2013 operational plan, major areas of concern and/or contention can be summarized as:

- Land cover (i.e., vegetation) decisions and impacts to environment/biodiversity
- Timber harvest techniques
- Impacts to public/personal enjoyment
- Health and safety concerns
- Short- and long-term fate of Permanent School Trust lands

Land cover decisions and impacts to environment/biodiversity

Stewardship of the Sand Dunes State Forest (SDSF) was a common theme among stakeholders. However, there was contention about the appropriate means of caring for this landscape. Stakeholders disagreed about:

- the appropriateness of maintaining pine – especially white pine – in SDSF
- the importance or necessity of increasing oak savanna in SDSF
- the quantity of oak savanna desirable for SDSF
- the potential impact on biodiversity and rare species of implementing the 2013 operational plan
- the overall environmental impact of implementing the 2013 plan

Examples of perspectives about land cover include calls to 1) shift to a multi-age white pine/oak forest cover type across SDSF 2) phase out all pine and shift to a cover type of oak savanna across SDSF, and 3) implement the plan as written. Some stakeholders were greatly concerned that rare species would be lost if SDSF was not managed for oak savanna. Others were concerned that biodiversity in general would decrease if pine were removed from the south unit of SDSF, or that deer numbers would be negatively impacted by implementation of the 2013 operational plan.

Timber harvest techniques

There was concern expressed, especially from some of the local residents, about the use of “clearcutting” as a method of final/regeneration harvest for timber, especially bordering residential properties, hiking trails, and other popular recreation areas within SDSF. There was also some concern expressed about the use of a shorter rotation age for red pine, and about the negative impact of slash (i.e., woody debris from timber harvest) on recreation (e.g., hiking) and wildlife movement within the state forest.

Impacts to public/personal enjoyment

Some stakeholders were concerned that implementation of the 2013 operational plan would impact recreational accessibility or enjoyment in SDSF. Local residents especially were concerned about the impacts of tree removal near their properties and the impact on aesthetics. This concern was also expressed for the Ann Lake Campground. Some feared that hunting would become more difficult. However, others expressed the potential recreational benefits of implementing the 2013 operational plan, such as for birding, “herping” (searching for amphibians and reptiles), and other wildlife and plant viewing opportunities. There were differing opinions about the appropriateness of hunting and horse use in SDSF.

Health and safety concerns

Stakeholder expressed health and safety concerns about:

- prescribed burning near residences (risk of spreading)
- prescribed burning of poison ivy infested areas (smoke inhalation risk)
- the impact of pesticides on local water supplies
- slash from timber harvest (difficult to navigate in woods when walking)

Short- and long-term fate of Permanent School Trust lands

Some stakeholders were concerned that shifting more Permanent School Trust lands into SDSF from other counties would, in the short-term, increase harvest levels on those lands and, in the long-term, result in the eventual sale of Trust lands (this concern was for all Trust lands in Sand Dunes, not just potential new Trust lands). There seemed to be agreement among stakeholders that the Trust lands in SDSF should not be sold.

Key Changes DNR is Making Based on Public Feedback

Stakeholders provided written comments on topic-driven questionnaires distributed during each of the scheduled meetings. Input was also collected during small-group table discussions and large-group discussion sessions for each topic. As a follow-up at subsequent meetings, DNR presented a summary of what was written and heard, along with incremental decisions reached along the way. Key DNR decisions resulting from this collaboration include a commitment to:

1. Collaborate with neighboring landowners to address buffer requests and aesthetic concerns along the shared boundary, prior to future timber sales.
2. Retain the pine trees within the campsites of the Ann Lake Campground except when removal is necessary to maintain public safety.
3. Communicate with local residents and local government about upcoming planned timber sales, timber harvests, prescribed burns, restoration projects, and changes to Trust land status.
4. Modify the 2013 operational plan based on stakeholder feedback, statutory requirements, DNR's mission for state forests, and best available science. Ensure the plan addresses topics of stakeholder interest. DNR will provide a draft revision for stakeholder review by the end of February 2017.
5. Continue to engage stakeholders with informational meetings, educational field trips, GovDelivery email messages, and specific SDSF web resources.
6. Work with the Orrock Town Board to resolve the township roads located on state land that do not currently have easements.
7. Use science-based adaptive management tools to inform decisions on restoring, protecting, and managing rare plants and wildlife (e.g., evaluate effectiveness of mechanical treatments vs. herbicide application).

Next Steps in the Public Engagement Process

The public engagement process will continue in 2017, in order to receive feedback on the revision of the 2013 operational plan and its implementation.

Revisions to the operational plan

DNR leadership will continue to discuss the management direction of the Sand Dunes State Forest (SDSF) in the coming months. The operational plan will be revisited and modified, based on stakeholder feedback, statutory requirements, DNR's mission for state forests, and best available science. DNR expects to complete a revised draft of the operational plan during the 2017 Legislative session.

Ongoing role of the Stakeholder Advisory Group

The Stakeholder Advisory Group will be convened in early 2017 to provide feedback on a draft of the plan before it is released for a 30-day public review period. Once the plan has been finalized, DNR will seek opportunities to engage stakeholders in the implementation of the plan. This may include an ongoing role for interested stakeholders to meet semi-annually for updates on progress and ongoing feedback.

Ongoing communication strategies

In addition to further meetings with stakeholders, DNR will employ several communication strategies to continue to inform interested parties about developments in SDSF. The department will continue to update the public using the GovDelivery email distribution tool. The [SDSF Stakeholder Advisory Group](#) webpage will continue to be a resource for those interested in the project. Further, as mentioned above, the department will continue to engage one-on-one with adjacent landowners as well as the Orrock Township Board about management decisions and developments in SDSF.

Appendix A: Project Documentation

All listed project documentation is available online on the project website:

<http://dnr.state.mn.us/forestry/sand-dunes/index.html>

Project documentation includes:

- Summaries from stakeholder meetings 1-6
- Responses from DNR to suggestions provided by stakeholders during the meetings (these can be found in the meeting summaries)
- Slides from DNR/School Trust Land presentations
- A “Question and Answer” page to respond to stakeholder questions, information requests, and misunderstandings
- Other key references and resources

Appendix B: Stakeholder Meeting Dates and Topics

	Date*	Location	Topic
Meeting 1	Mon. June 27th	Big Lake High School, Big Lake	Introduce process; Overview of SDSF Operational Management Plan, initial reactions
Meeting 2	Mon. July 25	Independence Elementary School, Big Lake	Forest/tree management
Meeting 3	Mon. Aug. 29	Lions Park Center, Elk River	Recreational opportunities and management
Meeting 4	Mon. Sept. 26	Holiday Inn 9200 Quaday Ave NE Otsego, MN 55330	Wildlife and native plant management
Field Tour	Sat. Oct. 22nd	Sand Dunes State Forest and surrounding area	Timber management, oak savanna/rare features management, Ann Lake campsite tree management
Meeting 5	Mon. Oct. 24	Big Lake High School, Big Lake	Land management issues; Trust lands
Meeting 6	Mon. Dec. 5	Big Lake High School, Big Lake	Roads issues; Next steps and ongoing public involvement efforts

* All meetings (except the field tour) were held 6pm-9pm.

Appendix C: Stakeholder Advisory Group Membership

Names	Organization/Affiliation
Statewide and Other Group Interests	
John Korzeniowski	MN DNR
Ron Denn (sub: Carolle St. Jean)	MN Trailriders Association
Dean Thompson	MN United Snowmobile Assoc.
Mark Burley	MN Deer Hunters Assoc.
Ray Higgins	Timber Producers Assoc.
Chris Smith	The Wildlife Society
Misi Stine	MN Herpetological Society
Brad Johnson (sub: Myrna Krueger)	Friends of SNWR
Bob Djupstrom (sub: Ellen Fuge)	Friends of the SNA
John Riebel	Sherburne County Board
Tony Hewitt	Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge
Bob Quady	SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Private Landowners	
Ron Geurts	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Judy Geurts	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Bob Goth	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Clarice Goth	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Donna Bouley	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Don Bouley	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Joe Magda	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Jean Magda	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Steve Carr	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition
Bob Hassett	Private landowner/SDSF Concerned Citizens Coalition /Orrock Township
Bob Hammar	Private landowner
Greg Spar	Private landowner
Larry Alford	Private landowner
John Alford	Private landowner
Gerry McFarland	Private landowner
State Representatives	
Jim Newberger	15B
Sondra Erickson	15A

Appendix D: Public Engagement Project Process Evaluation

Full report will be posted to the [project webpage](#) (Appendix A).

Executive summary

Background

A variety of techniques were employed throughout the Sand Dunes State Forest (SDSF) public engagement project to provide information, create discussion, and collect feedback from the public. Examples include informational presentations, group discussion, collecting written feedback to discussion questions, email communications, meeting summaries, DNR responses to suggestions and questions, and maintenance of a project website for storing resources. A process evaluation was distributed (using Snap Surveys) in late December 2016 to the email lists of past meeting attendees to assess the effectiveness of the process in informing and engaging the public in the discussion around SDSF.

We estimate that this process evaluation questionnaire was completed by approximately 60% of stakeholders who a) attended at least two of the six Stakeholder Advisory Group meetings (as either an advisor or an audience member) and b) provided their email address at meetings (n=24).

Key Findings

Respondents were generally satisfied with the structure of the meetings, especially meeting frequency and the topics covered in meetings. The least satisfying component (of those listed) was the small group discussions, during which one respondent noted feeling “outnumbered.” Respondents also generally found the meeting summaries and the feedback provided by DNR on their suggestions to be useful.

The project had a [webpage](#) to hold resources, project documentation, and a ‘Q&A’ page for DNR to respond to questions and misinformation. Most respondents had visited the website at some point. While overall the website was useful to visitors, it was not rated as useful as the meeting summaries or DNR’s feedback on stakeholder suggestions. The most useful resource on the website, according to respondents, was the project handouts/documentation.

We sought to understand how well the process engaged and informed stakeholders. Respondents generally felt that the process was effective at collecting their feedback, though the overall rating was ‘luke-warm’ (4.7 on a 7-pt scale of effectiveness). In later comments, some stakeholders expressed feeling that their opinion would not produce a change in the operational plan. While some stakeholders felt their voices were heard, others did not feel that much was accomplished during the process. However, it was clear that respondents’ familiarity with the operational plan grew as a result of the process, with the percentage of those who felt highly familiar with the plan increasing from 35% to 75% over the course of the process.

Stakeholders were asked if they felt respected by DNR and if they had adequate contact with staff throughout the process. Most respondents felt respected (83%) and many felt that contact with staff was adequate (71%). Respondents described staff as “approachable,” “professional,” “friendly,” “open and honest,” as having “excellent” commitment to meeting attendance, and as being willing to listen and answer questions. However, some respondents expressed concerns, such as discontent with the make-up of the advisory group and concern that their feedback would ultimately be ignored. A few

other concerns that were expressed seemed to stem from experiences respondents had before the Stakeholder Advisory Group was formed.

Finally, stakeholders were asked about the most and least valuable aspects of the process, and what feedback they had for improving future processes. (Note: due to an error in the survey instrument, response length was limited for the most/least valuable aspects questions, which limited at least one respondent's ability to answer; there seemed to be no restriction on the feedback question). Respondents found the most value in the fact that the process informed and educated the public while also engaging them and listening to their input; the opportunity to hear diverse points of view; and interactions with experts through presentations and the field tour. 'Least valuable' aspects were more variable among respondents. Examples include: redundancy in covering certain topics, not enough detail in others; unwillingness by some to hear others' perspectives; inability to adequately correct misinformation; and inconsistency in meeting attendance from some stakeholders, leading to confusion over things that had already been covered.

One concern expressed by several participants was feeling that DNR was interested in informing stakeholders and "placating" them, but not in listening to them and making changes. However, there were differing opinions on this subject, as some respondents felt they were treated fairly and listened to. Responses were also mixed on the role of the public in the planning process – some expected to be able to participate in the plan-writing process, while others felt that the plan was already good and additional public involvement was unnecessary. Several stakeholders expressed concerns about the involvement of elected officials in the Stakeholder Advisory Group, feeling that they received special treatment and dominated the process. Other concerns with the advisory group were that it seemed imbalanced in its representation, and that a better forum was needed for non-group members beyond what was offered.

Overall, respondents were satisfied with the public engagement process. While some respondents expressed concerns about certain aspects of the meetings and the ultimate impact of their feedback, most felt respected throughout the process and many felt they had adequate opportunity to provide feedback and have their questions answered by DNR staff.