

State Forest Classification and Road / Trail Designation: Motor Vehicle Access to Minnesota's Public Lands

Background. In 2003, Minnesota's State Legislature called for a *'forest-by-forest'* review of all 58 State Forests to evaluate motor vehicle access needs. This assessment, which wrapped-up December 31, 2008, is based upon newly collected forest access inventory, which provides a comprehensive accounting of existing roads, trails and other *'undesignated'* routes on state and county forest lands all across the state. Plan implementation is now underway all across the state.

Scope. This legislatively mandated review covered some 5,714,400 acres, including 3,075,600 acres of forestry-administered land within state forests and 815,000 acres of so-called *'scattered state lands'* which are located outside of state forest boundaries. In addition, some 980,300 acres of county lands and 843,500 acres of federal lands located within state forests were also evaluated. The scope of this effort was unprecedented.

Process Details. This process involves segment-by-segment route evaluations to determine which should remain open to vehicular use; which ought to be closed, and which might be better suited to non-motorized traffic only. More than an off-highway vehicle planning exercise, the teams also evaluated highway-licensed vehicle travel in the forest. Interdisciplinary DNR Teams conducted this analysis in concert with county, federal and tribal land managers, then submitted their draft findings and recommendations for a rigorous 60-day public review. Face-to-face public meetings were an important part of this sometimes acrimonious process. Public interest was understandably very high, and political intervention wasn't uncommon.

Issues and Challenges. To kick things off, a comprehensive forest access route inventory was conducted in 2003-04'. In all, 5,714,400 acres were inventoried; including 3,075,600 acres of forestry-administered land within state forests; 980,300 acres of county lands, some 843,500 acres of federal lands within state forests; and another 815,000 acres of so-called *'scattered lands'* administered by DNR Forestry outside of state forest boundaries. In excess of 55,000 hours were spent on the route inventory by DNR field staff at a cost of more than \$1.6 million. Minnesota Conservation Corps (MCC) staff also contributed 10,288 hours to the effort. The MCC time was valued at approx. \$205,760. Forest route inventory data was then loaded into a special database called 'WHEELS', which was developed by DNR (at considerable cost) specifically to store this data. This spatial database enables the department to update and manipulate forest route data for a variety of purposes and management applications.

Among the many challenges faced by DNR Planners and Field Teams, were ambiguities in the data caused by interspersed land ownerships, variable project boundaries, inaccurate land records, outdated State Forest Boundary data, seasonal or dual-use trail treadways, and inconsistencies in the collection and reporting of field data attributes by various field inventory teams. Routes too narrow or too wet to inventory, for example, were typically noted by data points which are often difficult to quantify or connect. And, despite the use of historical records, administrative maps, aerial photos and updated timber inventory data to fill-in the gaps, it is still often difficult to locate and map narrow single-track trails across checkerboard land ownerships through the forest.

Planning Process Objectives

- Designate a sustainable system of forest roads and trails that provide for public vehicular access.
- Close all unsustainable routes to vehicular travel.
- Reclassify State Forest Lands as appropriate, per motor vehicle use.
- Motorized use should not supplant or displace non-motor uses or users.

- Create designated and/or de facto non-motorized areas (or buffers) via route or areal closures.
- Designated trails and trail systems should provide a ‘quality’ recreational experience, and provide connections to other recreation facilities, support services and other popular destinations.
- Forest access routes should provide adequate access for both recreational and utilitarian purposes (*e.g., hunting, trapping, angling, fuelwood and bough collecting, berry and mushroom picking, etc.*)

Public Process Objectives

- Meaningfully engage interested and affected stakeholders throughout this process.
- Synchronize public involvement steps w/cooperators, to the extent possible, via shared public meetings and simultaneous public review periods to minimize confusion.
- Clearly communicate planning status, next steps, decision points and appeal options.
- Maintain a complete planning record in the event of administrative or legal appeals.

Desired Outcomes

- Substantial, enduring agreement regarding motor access to public forest lands.
- Stakeholders respect the process, feel valued and listened to – despite disagreements.
- Consistent, understandable and enforceable regulatory framework across public forest lands.
- Clearly signed and mapped motor/non-motor roads, trails and (legal) forest access routes that provide for both recreational and utilitarian forest use.
- Updated visitor maps that reflect new route designations, route closures and non-motor area designations.

Caveats. The DNR planning exercise :

- Isn’t a comprehensive or full-blown outdoor recreation planning or land-use zoning exercise. It’s really just a long-overdue administrative route disposition exercise.
- Deals only with existing routes through the forests – no new trail development is contemplated.
- Makes only incremental changes to already designated roads or trails.
- Addresses both motor/non-motor routes through the forest, but isn’t intended to partition state forests into motor/no-motor use zones.
- Puts the Interdisciplinary Field Team in the driver’s seat, and provides broad discretion and potent tools for their use. Public and agency review serve as ‘*checks*’ to ensure fairness and balance in the final direction.
- Isn’t the last opportunity to propose new trails or trail connections in Minnesota’s State Forests – it’s really just the beginning!

Current Status. This process wrapped-up on December 31, 2008. All 58 State Forests containing 12,132 miles of inventoried routes have been completed.

Route designations resulting from this process include over 2,300 miles of roads, 831 miles of ATV/OHM Trail, 143 miles of single-track OHM Trail, 27 miles of ORV Trail (*i.e., jeep or truck*), and 827 miles of non-motorized trails. Over 3,382 miles of routes, or about one-third of all state land routes have been permanently closed to all or most vehicular traffic.

To Learn More. Planning has just wrapped-up. To learn more, you can log on to www.findthetrails.com and click on ‘Plans and Proposals’. You’ll find a wealth of information about this process and implementation progress to-date.. Or, contact Brian McCann @ 651/259-5627 or Toll Free 1-888-MINNDNR (646-6367) with questions or FFI.