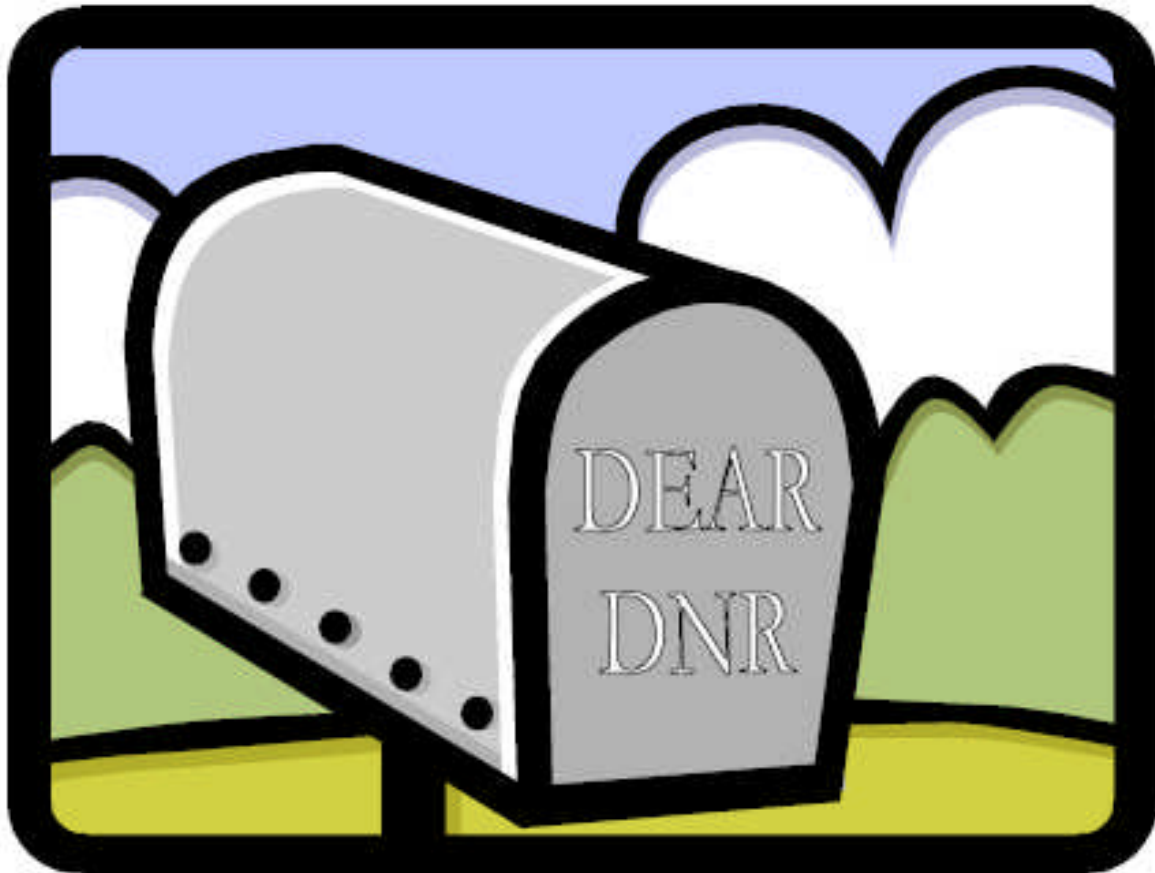


**Forest Classification and  
Forest Road and Trail Designations for the  
Southern Minnesota Forest Access Planning Unit**  
(Birch Lakes, Sand Dunes, R. J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood Forests  
and Scattered Forest Lands)

**Response to Comments  
October 16, 2008**



**Minnesota Department of Natural Resources**

DNR Southern Minnesota Forest Access Road/Trail Designation Planning Team

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## **BACKGROUND**

*Minnesota Laws 2003, Chap. 128, Article 1, Sect. 167 (as amended)* requires the Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to review the motor vehicle classification of all state forests and state forest lands by December 31, 2008. The Commissioner is to evaluate current forest classifications, on a forest-by-forest basis, according to public notice and public meeting requirements set forth in *Minnesota Rules Part 6100.1950*, and retain or modify the classification as appropriate.

**Description of Lands Covered by this plan.** The Southern Minnesota State Forest Planning Unit the forest classifications and road/trail designation plan covers all of the DNR Forestry-administered lands within the statutory boundaries of the Sand Dunes State Forest, Birch Lakes State forest and the Richard J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood Forest and scattered State Forest lands administered by the DNR Division of Forestry within the counties of *Sherburne, Morrison, Benton, Kandiyohi, Martin, Nicollet, Meeker, Sibley, Yellow Medicine, Hennepin, Stearns, Houston, Fillmore, Olmsted, Winona, Wabasha, Goodhue, Dakota, Rice and Le Sueur.*

**Open Houses.** Two Open Houses were held September 10-11, 2008 in Elk River and Rochester respectively. The purpose of those meetings was to alert stakeholders to this planning effort, and to solicit comments, questions and suggestions for the planning team. Attendees were also invited to share with the team their thoughts and experiences regarding trails access and use of state lands in the Southern Minnesota Forest Access Planning Unit. Both meetings were productive and informative.

**Public Review and Public Meetings.** The 60-day public review period on the Team's draft proposal began July 7, 2008 with legal notice in the State Register on page 16 ([Volume 33, Number 1, Pages 1-36, July 7, 2008](#)), issuance of a statewide Press Release, and web posting of the Draft Plan and Maps at [www.dnr.state.mn.us](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us). About 5 persons attended the DNR sponsored meeting held September 10, 2008 in Elk River and over 35 people attended the September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008 meeting in Rochester. Written comments were submitted at both the meetings, and via Email, and by U.S. Mail during the comment period which officially closed on September 12, 2008 (Comments were accepted until September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008 due to the open houses being scheduled on the next to last day of the comment period).

**Project Scope and Limitations.** This Forest Classification and Route Designation Plan contains trail use guidance for the Sand Dunes and Birch Lakes State Forests, and the Richard J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood State Forest, and for scattered DNR administered forestlands outside of state forest boundaries within the Southern Minnesota Forest Access Planning Unit. Twenty counties are included in the expansive planning area including; Houston, Fillmore, Olmsted, Winona, Wabasha, Goodhue, Rice, Le Sueur, Dakota, Sherburne, Hennepin, Morrison, Stearns, Benton, Kandiyohi, Martin, Nicollet, Meeker, Sibley and Yellow Medicine. In total, more than 60,020 acres of state land and 384 miles of inventoried routes were evaluated with respect to various trail uses.

The plan addresses only EXISTING inventoried routes located on state administered forest lands. No new road or trail construction, or grant-in-aid trail construction, is contemplated or proposed within this plan. As a result, trail designations resulting from this process are legislatively exempted from Environmental Quality Board rules regarding environmental review for recreational trail projects.

The plan does not address OHV use of public road ditches or road rights-of-way, or the use of private lands, trails or roadways. Nothing in this plan is intended to endorse nor discourage any potential future State Trail, unit trail, or grant-in-aid trail development proposals.

The forests' current classifications served as the starting point for classification discussions. Route evaluations were based upon current use, potential conflicts, existing conditions and surrounding resource quality.

All inventoried state land routes are depicted on planning maps. Informal, local use routes on state, federal, and especially on private lands, were not inventoried and are not depicted on the DNR draft or final maps.

Every effort was made to maintain existing vehicular access, subject to environmental constraints and land ownership considerations. The team sought to connect routes where possible, and carefully weighed all options and alternatives. Team members also attempted to physically separate conflicting (motorized vs. non-motorized) recreational uses wherever possible. This plan presumes that forest users (motorized or non-motorized) are, for the most part, law abiding and respectful of trail rules, regulations and sign postings. Speculation to the contrary is unfounded and counter-productive.

All existing and newly designated travel routes will be mapped, and signed as appropriate. These routes, and these forests, will also be the focus of stepped up field enforcement during the implementation period as forest users adjust to trail use regulations. Finally, should assumptions prove incorrect or use conditions change substantially, forest classifications can be reevaluated and trail designations revisited and altered through a plan amendment process.

## **COMPILATION OF COMMENTS**

Written comments were received from approximately 90 groups and individuals. [For a complete listing, please contact Michele Hanson @ 651/2595785]. Public comments were sorted and distributed to members of the DNR's Southern Minnesota Forest Access Planning Team for their evaluation and response.

## **RESPONSE TO TOPICS OF CONCERN**

Like comments were grouped under one or more of the five major headings listed below. The departmental response to public comments and questions is organized accordingly. The categories are:

- Forest Classification Preference
- Site Specific Comments & Suggestions
  - Zumbro Bottoms Management Unit
  - Hay Creek Management Unit
- Maintain OHM use and Special Permit Events
- Request for off road truck/technical course facility
- Support of Plan

## Forest Classification Preference

**COMMENT:** A number of individuals expressed their support for, or opposition to the proposed classification scheme proposed for the Southern Minnesota State Forest Access Planning Unit Forest Lands.

**DNR RESPONSE:** The DNR acknowledges these individuals and appreciates their perspectives. The department will apply the ‘closed’ classification to the Sand Dunes and Birch Lakes State Forests as outlined in the Southern Minnesota State Forest Access Plan. A ‘closed’ classification eliminates all off-highway vehicle use in the forest, for all purposes, year round, including that on designated state forest roads. The seasonal hunting/trapping exceptions of MS Chap. 84.926 do not apply in a ‘closed’ forest. The Planning Team felt that closure is necessary to protect and preserve the sensitive forest ecosystems from OHV impacts. Specifically, they cite impacts to forest soils, fragile wildlife habitat, exotic species spread, and the limited size of the Birch Lakes State Forest.

The Richard J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood State Forest, as well as the scattered state forest lands outside state forest boundaries in *Sherburne, Morrison, Benton, Kandiyohi, Martin, Nicollet, Meeker, Sibley, Yellow Medicine, Hennepin, Stearns, Houston, Fillmore, Olmsted, Winona, Wabasha, Goodhue, Dakota, Rice and Le Sueur* Counties will be classified as ‘limited’ as outlined in the Southern Minnesota State Forest Access Plan.

**COMMENT:** One individual argued for “Limited” classification for the Sand Dunes State Forest. This person felt that if trails were well built and maintained ATV use would be sustainable. She stated “there is no trail system that can accept the ‘damage’ caused by equestrian use that cannot accept ‘damage’ caused by motorized use”.

**DNR RESPONSE:** The Planning Team did debate the merits of a ‘Limited’ classification, but determined that a classification of “Closed” was appropriate at this time. In the team’s judgment, historic use of ATVs within the Forest had caused significant damage and made motorized use unsustainable due to the limitations of the sandy soils.

## Site Specific Comments & Suggestions

**COMMENT:** Some individuals suggested that better signage and user education was needed.

**DNR RESPONSE:** Designated travel routes will be mapped, and signed as appropriate. These forests will also be the focus of stepped-up field enforcement during the implementation period as forest users adjust to trail use designations and regulations.

**COMMENT:** Several Comments were received regarding specific improvements to trail segments.

**DNR RESPONSE:** Some designated routes will require maintenance, repair or improvement. This will be done over the next year during the plan implementation period. This is why the plan’s effective date is delayed for one full field season from the time of final approval.

## Site Specific Comments & Suggestions for Zumbro Bottoms Management Unit:

**COMMENT:** Several equestrian trail users expressed their opposition to the proposal to proactively close the “Fern Trail”.

**DNR RESPONSE:** The Fern Trail was created by equestrian users within Zumbro Bottoms and had become unstable and considerable erosion was occurring. The Planning team initially felt that the trails was unsustainable and should be give a designation of “proactively closed”. Over the Summer Trails and Waterways staff reevaluated the trail during a field visit and developed a solution to reroute a portion of the trail thereby eliminating the unstable portion of the route. Consequently only a short section of the trail was closed and the rest of the Fern Trail has been proposed to be designated for Equestrian use.

## RE: Hay Creek Management Unit

**COMMENT:** Many comments were received requesting that Hay Creek trails be designated for equestrian use and the proposed designation for mountain bike use be eliminated. Equestrian riders expressed concern that mixing horse with mountain bikes creates an unsafe situation on the trails.

**DNR RESPONSE:** The DNR acknowledges these individuals and appreciates their perspectives in regards to trail user safety. It is the current high level of use by equestrian riders at Hay Creek that creates unsafe conditions if the trails were additionally designated for mountain biking. The high level of equestrian use at Hay Creek is a distinct difference from the lower levels of equestrian use at other units where the team is still recommending designation of both mountain bike and horse use on the same routes.

**COMMENT:** Comments were solicited from the Minnesota Off Road Cyclists and the International Mountain Bicycling Association in regards to the request to eliminate the proposed mountain biking designation at Hay Creek. Mountain bike trail users agreed that mixing bikes with heavily used horse trail does pose a threat to both trail users safety.

Mountain bike trail users prefer a 10-15 mile trail stacked trail system that provides routes for beginners, intermediate and advanced skill riders. The mountain bike community stated it would be willing to give up the designation of trails at Hay Creek if an alternative opportunity could be identified and provided for in the future. Bronk and Snake Creek Management Units were suggested as possible locations.

**DNR RESPONSE:** DNR intends to work with biking groups in the future to identify and explore development of an appropriate opportunity that would provide a 10+ mile separated mountain biking opportunity within the Southern Minnesota Forest Access Planning Unit.

## Maintain OHM use and Special Permit Events

**COMMENT:** OHM trail users were encouraged to see that the motorized use at Snake Creek and Trout Valley will remain the same and they will continue to have the opportunity to hold the two Special Use Permit Events the Golden Eagles club sponsors at Zumbro Bottoms Management Unit. OHM users also expressed a desire to develop additional trail opportunities within the planning area.

**DNR RESPONSE:** The DNR acknowledges the enthusiasm, cooperation and volunteer time and contributions for trail maintenance of the OHM trail users. This planning process was not a comprehensive recreational planning process and was focused on addressing only established routes. Development of additional trail opportunities will need to be addressed during future planning processes and in continued cooperation with OHM riders and other stakeholders.

## Request for off road truck/technical course facility

**COMMENT:** Is there ever going to be anywhere for my family and friends to go with our off road trucks within 100 miles of Rochester Minnesota?

**DNR RESPONSE:** The DNR acknowledges these individuals and appreciates their perspectives and enthusiasm for working with DNR to develop this type of facility. This request is beyond the scope of this planning process. The current planning process was not a comprehensive recreational planning process, but was focused on addressing only established routes. No new trails, trail connections, or other OHV facilities are proposed. These system improvements will need to be developed subsequent to this effort and in concert with riders, local clubs and other stakeholders.

## Support of Plan

**COMMENT:** A number of individuals expressed their support for the Draft Forest Access Plan proposed for the Southern Minnesota Forest Access Planning Unit State Forest Lands.

**DNR RESPONSE:** The DNR acknowledges these individuals and appreciates their expression of support for the Draft Plan.