System Plan
Charting a course for the future

STATE PARKS AND RECREATION AREAS

WATER RECREATION

STATE FOREST RECREATION AREAS

STATE TRAILS

DRAFT - November 2014
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Mission Statement

Our mission is to work with citizens to conserve and manage the state’s natural resources, to provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and to provide for commercial uses of natural resources in a way that creates a sustainable quality of life.

Division of Parks and Trails Vision Statement

Our vision is to create unforgettable park, trail, and water recreation experiences that inspire people to pass along the love for the outdoors to current and future generations.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of the Plan

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Division of Parks and Trails must continue to demonstrate Better Government over the long term. This System Plan advances new approaches for managing DNR’s state parks and state recreation areas, state trails, forest recreation area, and water recreation system: 75 state park and recreation areas, 24 state trails, 62 state forest recreation areas, 1,500 public water accesses, 350 fishing piers, and 33 water trails.

Implementation of this plan will result in:
- Future investments focused on Minnesota’s most important natural resources and highest quality recreation opportunities.
- Staff better able to determine where and how to invest time and resources, and where to pursue new opportunities.
- Transparency with the Legislature and other stakeholders about priorities.
- More effective collaboration with our partners.
- Measureable improvements that advance Better Government.

A Differentiated Approach

The plan recommends a differentiated approach to managing our system, rather than trying to be all things to all people. Investment groups were identified using criteria to address the question of what types of investments should be made and where they should be located.

Integrated Directions Across All Four Systems

Although this plan in part discusses these four elements of the division’s responsibilities as separate systems, the division seeks to integrate its management where possible for consistency and efficiency. The System Plan provides direction for setting division priorities which helps identify key actions that can be taken across all division responsibilities.

Among the important areas of consideration for an integrated approach are protection (e.g. natural and cultural resources, infrastructure), innovation, outreach, flexibility/adaptability, thoughtful choices in good time and bad, and accessibility.

For more detail on these areas see Integrated Direction Across All Four Systems starting on p. 8.
**State Parks and State Recreation Areas**

The Division of Parks and Trails will organize and prioritize its work on the state park system into three investment groups: Destination Parks, Core Parks, and Rustic Parks.

**Destination state parks and state recreation areas** offer a destination-quality experience, with an array of outdoor recreation and lodging opportunities, park facilities, and naturalist-led interpretive offerings. They may have year-round camping (or other lodging) and staffing. Parks in this group have high use and attract visitors from across the state.

The Division will invest in Destination state parks and state recreation areas at a high level over the next 10 years to enhance campgrounds and group camps, visitor centers, lodging opportunities, and other amenities.

**Core state parks and state recreation areas** will offer a diversity of quality outdoor recreation experiences, from classic camping and hiking opportunities to adventurous climbing, mountain biking, OHV-riding, and kayaking opportunities, often in close proximity to population centers. This group has been further differentiated into Classic, Adventure, and Gateway parks and recreation areas. The emphasis for all of these parks will be on providing well-maintained campgrounds, day-use areas, and trails with basic services and amenities, including picnic tables, fire rings, and orientation signage.

In many ways, the Core group represents the typical visitor experience provided across much of the system to date.

**Rustic state parks and state recreation areas** will offer basic amenities, including picnic tables, fire rings, and orientation signage. Rustic parks will provide more self-directed services such as self-guided interpretation and self-registration.

**State Trails**

The Division of Parks and Trails will organize and prioritize its work on state trails into two investment groups: Destination Trails and Core Trails.

**Destination trails** will offer a destination-quality experience, with considerable amenities. Trails in this group will have high use and attract users from across the state and Midwest region. The division will lead the development and management activities for these state trails. Destination trails will have greater investment in amenities. Acquisition and rehabilitation will be high priority. More frequent maintenance will occur. Marketing efforts will also be higher priority.

**Core trails** will be well maintained, with basic services that provide a safe and enjoyable experience for trail users. The division will have the lead role in developing and managing some of these trails, while partners (such as local communities or trail associations) will have a lead role for others. Partner-led state trails may serve more local use than trails in other investment groups.

For more information about the process and criteria used to create the investment groups, see **State Parks and State Recreation Areas** starting on p. 10.

For a list of the State Parks and State Recreation Areas in each investment group see p. 19.

Recommendations specific to State Parks and State Recreation Areas begin on p. 21.

For more information about the process and criteria used to create the investment groups, see **State Trails** starting on p. 23.

For a list of the State Trails in each investment group see p. 29-30.

Recommendations specific to State Trails begin on p. 34.
Amenities that go beyond minimal or basic services for these trails may be provided in conjunction with partners or through outside fundraising.

The experiences provided on existing core trails will continue to be maintained. Core trails reflect the way in which state trails traditionally have been developed. Partners often take the lead in identifying right-of-way for acquisition. They support funding for acquisition, development, and rehabilitation.

**Forest Recreation Areas**

The Division of Parks and Trails will organize and prioritize its work on the forest recreation area system into three investment groups: Enhanced, Core and Minimum Maintenance Forest Recreation Areas.

**Enhanced forest recreation areas** have the potential to be developed with needed recreation amenities to support trail users in state forests. For example, motorized trail users would like to have campgrounds with shower buildings, expanded parking, and access from campgrounds to the state forest trail system. Horseback riders also seek improved amenities.

**Core forest recreation areas** will continue to provide the kind of outdoor recreation experience and amenities that are currently present. Existing facilities would be rehabilitated and replaced as needed.

At **minimum maintenance forest recreation areas**, current facilities would remain, but with limited maintenance. Opportunities for alternative forms of management through partnerships or other agreements should be explored where possible.

Alternative management strategies were identified for the investment groups to reduce costs and increase revenues.

**Water Recreation**

The Division of Parks and Trails will provide high-quality public water access sites and water trails by focusing on taking care of the existing facilities. Investment criteria will help guide decisions related to acquisition, development rehabilitation, maintenance and operations. The type of investment, along with its purpose, will determine how best to apply and evaluate the criteria.

**Water Recreation Directions**

- Focus primarily on taking care of and improving existing sites and facilities.
- Be more strategic in pursuing acquisitions for new sites or expansion of existing sites.

For more information about the process and criteria used to create the investment groups, see **Forest Recreation Areas** starting on p. 35.

For a list of the Forest Recreation Areas in each investment group see p. 36-38.

Recommendations specific to Forest Recreation Areas begin on p. 40.

For more information about the process and criteria developed to guide investments see **Water Recreation** starting on p. 42.

For more detail concerning Water Recreation directions and recommendations see p. 47-49.
• Move toward a public water access and water trail system that demonstrates best management practices.

• Move toward a decision-making process based on objective criteria, including both regional and statewide ranking of proposed projects.

Fishing Pier Program Directions

The overall goal of the fishing pier program is to improve fishing opportunities, especially to meet the needs of children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and those without a boat (only about 40 percent of those with fishing licenses also have a boat). In many cases, fishing pier installations are due to partnerships between the state, local government units, non-profit groups, and community organizations.

• Increase investment into the fishing pier program within the Division of Parks and Trails.

• Increase resources allocated toward managing the fishing pier program.

• Find sustainable and sufficient funding for new pier development and for routine maintenance, renewal, and rehabilitation.

Next Steps/Implementation

The System Plan is not anticipated to be a static document. Additional discussions within the division and with partners and stakeholders will help further refine how the division uses the directions from the plan to shape its priorities and future actions.

The directions and recommendations set out in the System Plan will be implemented through budget and operational decisions, as well as other decision-making processes. The division will use the system plan as a lens as it creates its next biennial budget requests, capital bonding requests, and other funding initiatives. The investment group frameworks will also influence how the division allocates acquisition funding, rehabilitation and development projects, staffing commitments and other resources across the four work areas discussed in the system plan.

The system plan directions will drive other planning efforts including individual state park and state trail management plans, and continued planning for trails and use areas in state forests. Planning efforts that create system-wide objectives for specific activities, such as winter biking and horseback riding, are also under consideration as tools for integrating the system plan directions into the division's efforts.

For more information see Next Steps/Implementation starting on p. 50.