

# Fort Ridgely State Park Management Plan Amendment

## Boundary Expansion, Horse Campground and Trail Connections



**Minnesota Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Parks and Recreation**

**January 2006**



## Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

500 Lafayette Road  
St. Paul, Minnesota 55155-40\_\_

### **Division of Parks and Recreation Approval of Management Plan Amendment for Fort Ridgely State Park**

The Division of Parks and Recreation develops plan amendments to update management plans to reflect the current development and operational proposals for a state park or state recreation area. The plan amendment process assists in formulating, evaluating and documenting these proposals.

This amendment to the 1983 Fort Ridgely State Park management plan addresses three areas: expansion of the park statutory boundary, renovation and operation of a recently purchased private horse campground, and development of the FairRidge Regional Trail and its connections to the state park.

The amendment received input and comment both within the Department of Natural Resources and from the public:

- released for public review which included an open house,
- approved by the Division of Parks and Recreation management team, and
- approved through the DNR's Region Interdisciplinary Review Service during December 2005.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Courtland Nelson', is written over a horizontal line.

Courtland Nelson, Director  
Division of Parks and Recreation

A handwritten date '12 Oct 06' in black ink is written over a horizontal line.

Date

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# FORT RIDGELY STATE PARK MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT



## State of Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Recreation

This plan amendment has been prepared as required by 2003 Minnesota Laws Chapter 86A.09, Subd. 1.

For more information on this management plan amendment please contact any of the following project participants from the Division of Parks and Recreation.



### **Central Office:**

Courtland Nelson  
Patricia Arndt  
Carmelita Nelson

500 Lafayette Rd Box 39, St. Paul, MN 55155  
Division Director  
Planning, IT and Marketing Manager  
Senior Planner

### **Regional Office:**

Steve Kirch  
Jeff Sieve  
Bob Beck  
Ed Brekke-Kramer

261 Highway 15 S., New Ulm, MN 56073-8915  
Regional Manager  
Regional Park Operations Supervisor  
Regional Naturalist  
Regional Resource Specialist

### **Fort Ridgely State Park:**

Mark Tjosaas  
Peter Bakken

72158 County Road 30, Fairfax, MN 55332  
Park Manager  
Assistant Park Manager

We would like to thank the all who participated in this planning process.

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# PURPOSE

The purpose of this amendment is to recommend changes to the park statutory boundary, set the direction for the new horse campground, and develop alternatives for the new FairRidge Trail connections to the state park.

The Plan Amendment supplements the campground and boundary sections of the 1983 Fort Ridgely State Park Management Plan and the 2000 Golf Course Management Plan Amendment.

This plan amendment present background information for the park statutory boundary changes and campground development. At the end of each section are the recommended future actions. The plan amendment provides the basic management direction for the park and is not intended to provide specific management or development details.

# DESCRIPTION

This amendment addresses three items: changes to the park statutory boundary, redesign and operation of a newly acquired horse campground and closing the existing state park horse campground, and the connections of the FairRidge Trail to the state park. (See Figure 1 – Amendment Areas of Interest.)

## *Park Statutory Boundary*

The park statutory boundary change adds approximately 467 acres to the state park, a portion of which is not contiguous to the current park. The lands added are privately owned, with three individual landowners. One of the parcels is contiguous to the current park, while the other two parcels are adjacent to each other but not contiguous to the rest of the state park. These parcels were added to the park statutory boundary by the Minnesota State Legislature in 2001.

## *New Horse Campground*

One of the non-contiguous parcels includes an existing campground that will be operated as a horse campground by the state park. Called Valley View Campground, the campground has 25 campsites (22 electric and 3 non-electric), a sanitation building with showers, and other facilities. The facility was originally opened as a private campground in 1994. The campground requires some redesign and upgrades to be consistent with the level of service and amenities typically available at state park facilities. The existing horse campground at Fort Ridgely State Park was located in a historic area of the park and negatively affected the landscape surrounding the historic fort. The DNR acquired the 15-acre Valley View Campground site in 2002. The state park horse campground was closed when the newly acquired campground was opened.

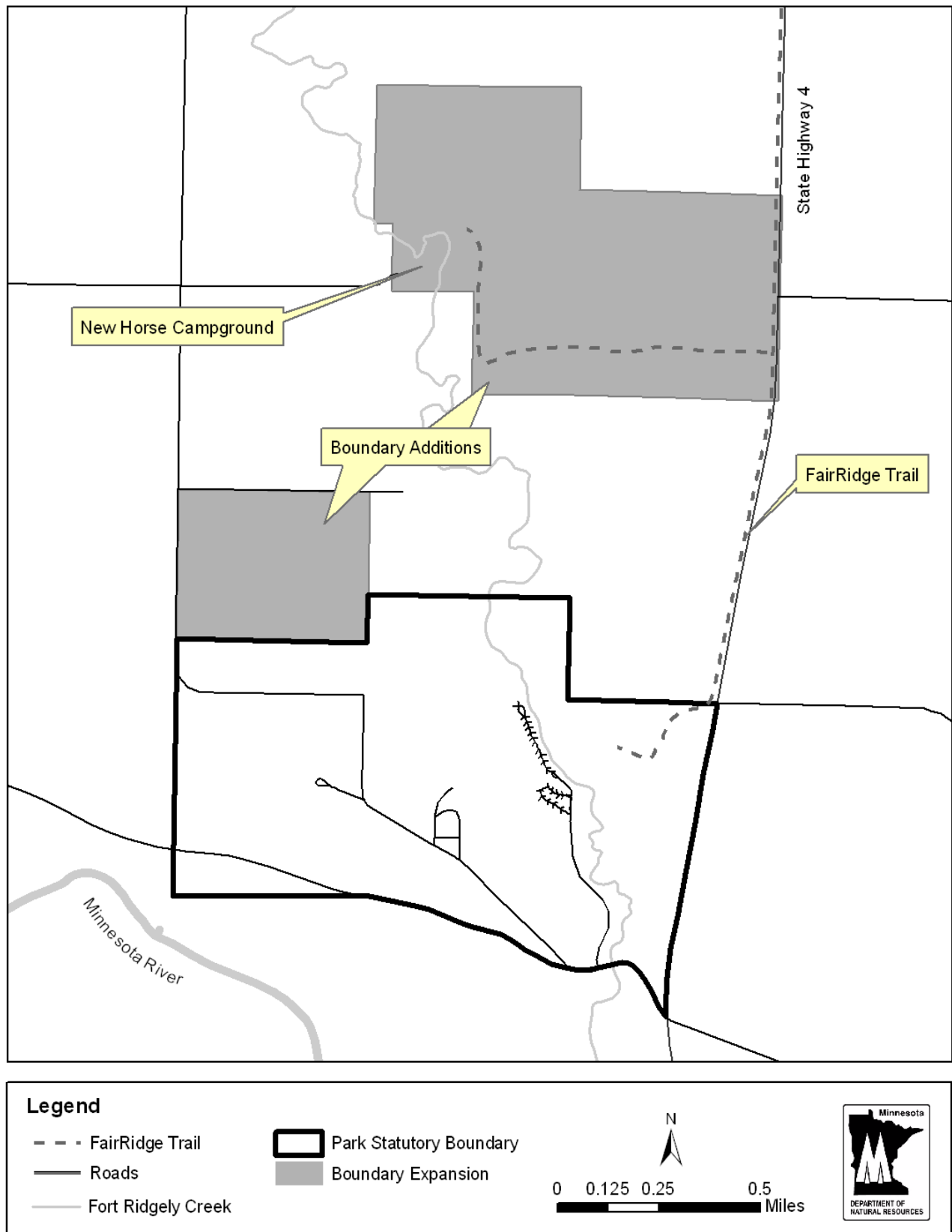
## *FairRidge Trail*

The FairRidge Trail is a non-motorized trail being developed by the City of Fairfax that will extend 6.5 miles from the city to Fort Ridgely State Park. The trail will have paved and non-paved treadways and is anticipated to serve mainly horseback riders and bicyclists. The trail connects to the existing trails in the state park and to the newly acquired horse campground.

Citizens and location governments were supportive of the boundary modifications and campground acquisition during the planning process.

# FORT RIDGELY STATE PARK

Figure 1 - Amendment Areas of Interest



# NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

## National Register Historic Districts

Fort Ridgely State Park contains two historic districts on the National Register of Historic Places. (See Figure 2 – Historic Districts.)

The Fort Ridgely Historic District was entered on the National Register of Historic Places on December 2, 1970, encompassing the entire state park as it was at that time. The historic district is focused on the historic fort and environs at the time of the fort's original construction and occupation (1855-1872). The historic district includes portions of the historic fort site, buildings, and segments of wagon road and trail. The Minnesota Historical Society administers approximately 20 acres of the historic district, including the commissary and restored foundations. The DNR Division of Parks and Recreation manages the rest of the land within the historic district.

The Fort Ridgely State Park CCC/Rustic Style Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 25, 1989. It is located within the larger Fort Ridgely Historic District. The historic district recognizes the work done by the Minnesota Historical Society and Veterans Conservation Corps (VCC) from 1935 to 1942: excavation of the fort site, restoration of the foundations of eight fort buildings, and reconstructed the entire commissary building. Other structures in the state park built during this era include picnic shelters, water fountains, recreation facilities, and the park manager's residence. The garage and conical water tower, made of Morton gneiss, are also notable for their design and construction.

The existing horse campground is located within the Fort Ridgely Historic District and near the Fort Ridgely State Park CCC/Rustic Style Historic District. The relocation of the horse campground to the Valley View Campground and subsequent closure of the existing campground would remove the use area from the historic district.

There are no known archaeological sites or significant vegetation or wildlife documented in the parcels to be added to the park statutory boundary, including the Valley View Campground. However, materials related to the historic fort or earlier American Indian occupation may be present but yet undiscovered on these properties.

The FairRidge Trail does not cross either historic district and utilizes primarily existing trail corridors in the southern portion of the state park. A portion of the trail alignment also follows a historic roadway. Survey work during the design and layout of the FairRidge Trail did not identify any other archaeological sites or materials.

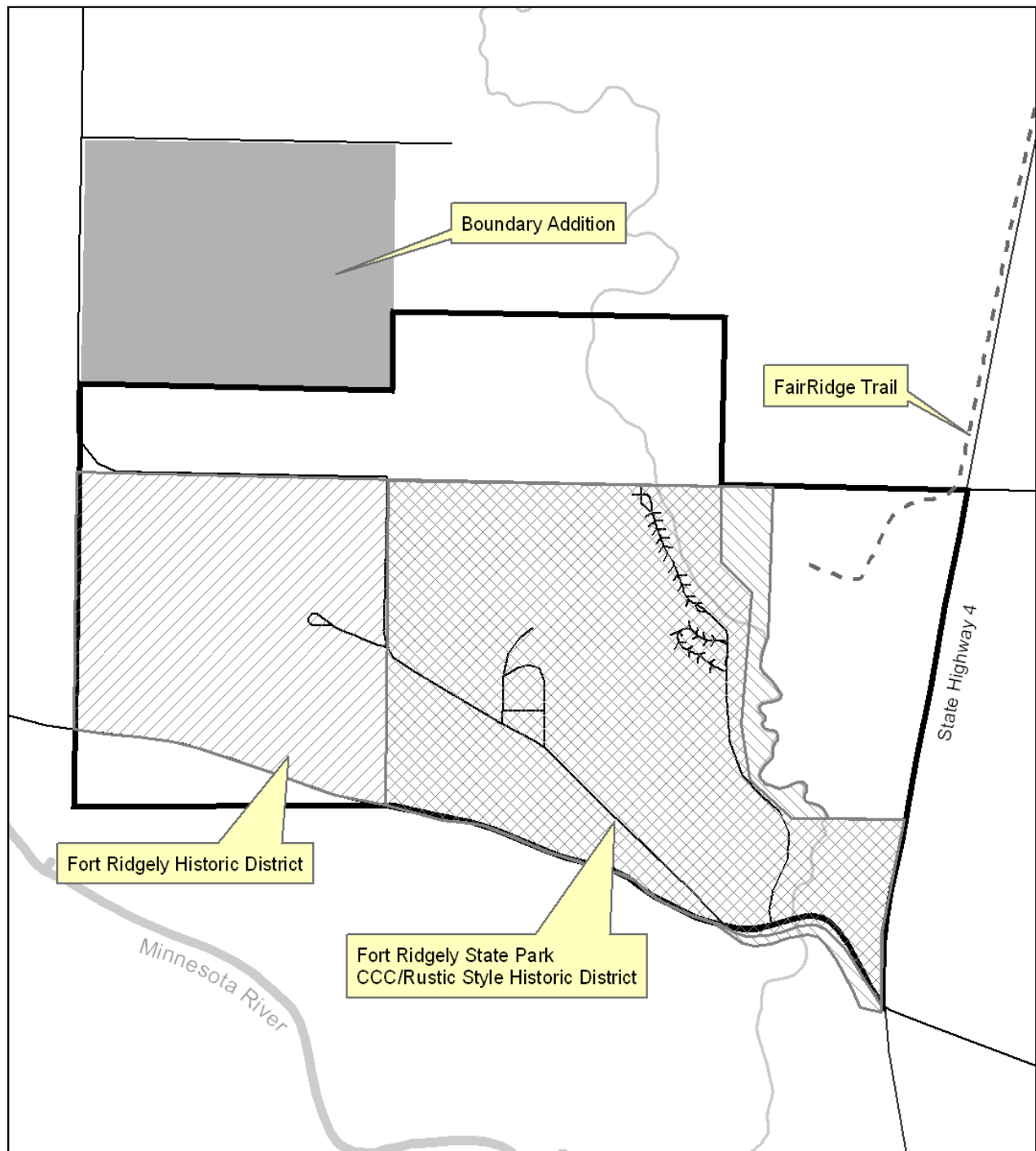
Opportunities exist for interpreting natural and cultural resources as part of the FairRidge Trail and new horse campground. For example, the new horse campground has several excellent sites for interpretation of local geology.

## Other Cultural Resources

Other cultural resources at Fort Ridgely State Park include an amphitheater, originally constructed in 1927 and recently restored, a historic private cemetery that is still in use, several American Indian burial mounds, and other archaeological sites.

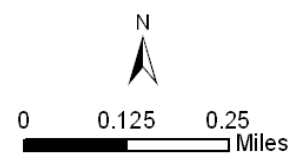
# FORT RIDGELY STATE PARK

Figure 2 - Historic Districts



## Legend

- - - FairRidge Trail
- Roads
- Fort Ridgely Creek
- Park Statutory Boundary
- Fort Ridgely Historic District
- Fort Ridgely State Park CCC/Rustic Style Historic District



# Geology

Deposits of kaolin clay are exposed in banks along Fort Ridgely Creek in the northern part of the park. The parcel immediately north of the state park is being actively mined for kaolin. Industrial clay is utilized for brick making, cement, livestock feed filler, specialty ceramics, and for modeling clay. Minnesota kaolin is not high enough grade for its highest value use as glossy paper coating.

## Vegetation

The lands added to the park statutory boundary are a mix of woods and farm fields. The ravines and areas along Fort Ridgely Creek are wooded and retain some of their native communities and character. Other portions of the properties have been converted to agricultural fields. The agricultural fields present an opportunity to restore native vegetation communities, likely prairie and oak savanna. Both of these communities are rare today in Minnesota, with few examples remaining in the heavily farmed area surrounding the state park. Resource plans will be developed to determine what native communities existed there before they were converted for farming and the steps for restoring them after they are acquired.

## Surface Water Resources

Fort Ridgely Creek flows through the lands added to the state park, as well as the existing state park. The upper watershed (miles 4.7–25.1) is intensively farmed. This area is flat and farmed with row crops. The lower reach (miles 0-4.6) consists of rolling hills and bluffs that are forested. The entire watershed is approximately 74 square miles and roughly 85% agricultural land, 8% forested, 5% farmstead, and 2% idle land.



Fort Ridgely Creek through the new horse campground has a relatively high gradient with a rocky riffle. Two areas in the campground have bluffs of exposed till. Deep pools are present at the upper bluff and downstream of the bridge where there is exposed bedrock on the left bank. Photo by Owen Baird, DNR

The upper reach is generally open ditch and is cultivated to the edge. In the lower reach, the riparian zone is still intact in native woody vegetation. However, the lower reach suffers from bank erosion and deposition of sand and gravel as a result of the profound alteration of the upper watershed.

The stream is not navigable. Fishing in the creek is limited to that created by trout stocking. It is a unique fishing opportunity in an area of limited water resources. The most recent stream management plan amendment for Fort Ridgely Creek provides for annual stocking of 500 rainbow trout and 500 brown trout in 2003, 2004, and 2005. Trout stocking was initiated in 1991 in an attempt to generate a fishery within the state park. Stocking was discontinued in 1995 due to degraded stream conditions (See Table 1 – Fish Stocking). The volatile and flashy nature of the stream, the absence of suitable trout habitat and the high water temperatures are all limiting factors for fish. Adjacent to the new campground, the following fish species were found in Fort Ridgely Creek during a 2003 survey: creek chub, white sucker, northern pike, rainbow trout, central stoneroller, hornyhead chub, bluntnose minnow, brassy minnow, common shiner, bigmouth shiner, blacknose dace, Johnny darter, fantail darter. This is similar to the list of species found in the lower reaches creek in the state park, with the addition of channel catfish.

**Table 1 - Fish Stocking in Fort Ridgely Creek**

| Year | Species                 | Size     | Number                   |
|------|-------------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| 1991 | Rainbow and brown trout | Yearling | 500 each                 |
| 1992 | Rainbow and brown trout | "        | 500 each                 |
| 1993 | Rainbow and brown trout | "        | 500 each                 |
| 1994 | Rainbow and brown trout | "        | 1,000 Rainbow, 500 Brown |
| 2001 | Rainbow and brown trout | "        | 400 Rainbow, 559 Brown   |
| 2002 | Rainbow trout           | "        | 500 Rainbow              |
| 2003 | Rainbow and brown trout | "        | 500 each                 |
| 2004 | Rainbow and brown trout | "        | 500 each                 |
| 2005 | Rainbow and brown trout | "        | 500 each                 |

## **Natural and Cultural Resource Recommendations:**

- Consult with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) on future trail and facility development to avoid adverse impacts to the historic districts.
- Survey proposed development areas for the presence of cultural resources. Historic and cultural resources should be preserved, documented and interpreted. If significant cultural resources are discovered during the surveys, facility siting, public use, and possible archaeological mitigation will need to be discussed to avoid or minimize impacts.
- Develop interpretive themes for the new horse camp that complement the main park interpretive program. For example, there are several excellent locations to interpret geology and kaolin clay.
- Monitor and control problem species such as buckthorn, prickly ash, and red cedar.
- Develop plans for restoring the newly acquired lands to native vegetation.
- Monitor and restore shoreline erosion. Maintain vegetation along the riparian buffer zone to filter runoff and to stabilize banks.
- Avoid management practices that could cause sediment to enter Fort Ridgely Creek.
- Work with neighboring landowners to promote watershed management practices upstream of park that reduce erosion and restores a more natural hydrograph for Fort Ridgely Creek.

# RECREATIONAL USE AND VISITOR SERVICES

## Existing Recreational Opportunities

Fort Ridgely State Park has two campgrounds with a total of 39 drive-in sites; 13 with electric hook-ups. The existing horse camp has 20 campsites, five with electricity. Other camping facilities include three walk-in sites and one group camp that can accommodate 40 people. Other recreation opportunities include a nine-hole golf course, an amphitheater, two picnic areas, a playground, horseshoe pits, a volleyball court, three sliding hills, and inner tube rental. The state park offers 11 miles of hiking and snowmobile trails, 10 miles of equestrian trails, five miles of cross-country ski trails, and snowshoeing on the golf course fairways.

The Chalet building is used as a warming house and provides year-round restroom facilities. The upper floor of the Chalet building can be rented for day-use or overnight lodging. Day-use capacity is 50 people, while overnight capacity is 25 people.

The existing horse campground was located on the current site in 1986. Previously this land was a farmstead and may have been the old stagecoach stop. The farmhouse was demolished and the rock foundation basement filled. Prior to the horse camp being in this location it was where the group camp is located today. In 2000, it was determined that the horse campground would need to be relocated a third time because of possible realignment of the golf course and the visual impact of the campground on the Fort Ridgely Historic District landscape.

## Valley View Campground

The private campground is located on a narrow peninsula in the bend of Fort Ridgely Creek surrounded by high wooded bluffs. It is sheltered from the cold northwest winds in the winter, and the creek, valley, and woods have a cooling effect on hot summer days.

The 15-acre campground has 22 sites with electric hookups and three non-electric sites. Many of the sites are spaced too closely for horse campers. A sanitation building with showers was built in 1993-1994 and is in good condition. The site amenities also include potable water, a large drainfield, dump station, a set of eight horse stalls, and a large open area. An old homestead had been remodeled on the site and was most recently used as a registration building. A large open field north and west of the campground on the opposite bank of Fort Ridgely Creek is accessible via a service road and bridge or a ford crossing. (See Figure 3 – Valley View Campground Layout.)

The campground requires some redesign and upgrades to be consistent with the level of service and amenities typically available at state park facilities, including improved spacing between sites. Several improvements have been made since the site was acquired in 2002, including adding vault toilets and upgrading the horse stalls.



The water supply currently available at the campground is a shared well with an adjacent private residence. The residence is located adjacent to the campground and also shares the campground access road. There are several options for resolving the water issue. The DNR could negotiate an agreement with the landowner to continue sharing the well. The DNR could install its own well to serve the campground. The DNR could also seek to purchase the residence, including the well. DNR purchase of the residence would also resolve any potential conflict concerning traffic or other disturbances caused by campground users. This option would require a park statutory boundary change.



# FORT RIDGELY STATE PARK


Figure 3 - Valley View Campground Layout



## Legend

 FairRidge Trail  
 Roads

 Park Statutory Boundary  
 Private Land Within  
Park Statutory Boundary

  
0 50 100 200  
Feet





It is recommended that the campsites should be spaced further apart to meet the needs of campers with horse trailers. Photo by Bruce Eng, DNR



The entrance to the campground will contain a registration kiosk and ground safe. Power lines should be buried. Photo by Bruce Eng, DNR

## FairRidge Trail

The FairRidge Trail was opened in June 2004. The 6.5-mile trail was funded through an ISTE A grant, a DNR Regional Trail Initiative Program grant, Renville County, and the Minnesota River Valley Recreation Trail Association. The trail extends along Highway 4 from the City of Fairfax Historic Depot Park to Fort Ridgely State Park. It is a multi-use trail with parallel treadways for horse and bicycles. It is a local trail that will complement the larger state trail system, including the Minnesota Valley Trail.

The majority of the 6.5-mile FairRidge Trail corridor runs along existing highway right-of-way. A horse-use spur of the trail extends west to near the Valley View Campground. One half-mile of the trail is with Fort Ridgely State Park, ending at the scenic overlook on the Airplane Hill Trail.

The City of Fairfax is responsible for maintenance and management of FairRidge Trail. The DNR Division of Parks and Recreation will not manage those sections outside of state-owned lands. To assure appropriate protection of state park resources, viewsheds and facilities immediately adjacent to the trail, state park staff will work with city staff to establish standards and parameters for maintenance activities on the segments of the trail that pass through the park. City staff and the park manager will plan, schedule and coordinate maintenance activities following these guidelines.

Because the trail passes through private property, it will be closed to horse riders and bicyclists during the hunting season. This means that the horse camp also will need to be closed during that time (approximately November 1) for safety reasons since the trail connection to the rest of the state park is across private property.

## **Future Revenue Opportunities**

The new horse campground has the potential to increase future revenue by offering services not offered in other state park horse camps such as stall rental and electric hook ups. The farmhouse at the campground will be renovated and rented it as a rustic bunkhouse. The new multi-use FairRidge Trail will also bring new users to the park that may need additional services such as food, bike lockers, or camping facilities.



It is recommended that the old farmhouse be renovated and used as a rustic bunkhouse rental unit. Photo by Bruce Eng, DNR.

## **Recreation Recommendations:**

### Short Term Recommendations

#### **Horse Campground**

- Close existing horse campground in the main park.
- Operate the new horse campground facility with a minimum of 20 sites using existing campsites, buildings, utilities, and design – making minor changes only.

- Operate the campground as a self-registration facility. Determine the appropriate staff level and make necessary improvements, including installing a registration kiosk and ground safe.
- Renovate and rent the farmhouse as a rustic bunkhouse.
- Consider options for acquiring a water supply for the campground. The current well is shared with an adjacent private property. Options include negotiating to continue sharing the well, installation of a separate well, or acquiring the adjacent property.
- Protect the drain field from horse traffic with fencing or other suitable barrier.
- Relocate/construct manure bunkers and determine manure disposal procedures.
- Use the saddle barn to store firewood for use in the campground.

### **Trails and Parking**

- Provide day-use parking facilities for horseback riders at the far end of the picnic grounds parking lot.
- Determine the best parking area for the bike trail. At this time, the chalet is the preferred location.
- As additional land is acquired, create shorter horse trail loops near the horse campground.
- Develop cooperative agreements with various trail interest groups to provide interpretation along the FairRidge Trail.

## **Long Term Recommendations**

### **Horse Campground**

- Redesign the campground configuration to meet state park and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards and provide a quality experience with special focus on the needs of the horseback riders. There should be a minimum of 20 designated sites. Sites 1-7 are acceptable; however more spacing is needed between the remaining sites. Parking spurs should be at least 40 feet long. Buffer strips between campsites and stream should be maintained.
- Redesign the campground entrance road to accommodate entry and registration of vehicles with large trailers.
- Work with saddle clubs to design and provide safe, durable tie posts/lines.
- Determine the best future use for the large field beyond the bridge based on attendance records and demand in the horse camp. If there is demand for additional sites, consider replacing the bridge and develop additional sites in the area. If not, restore the area to native vegetation.
- Provide additional amenities that are desirable to horse camp users and are appropriate for state park facilities.
- Utilize the farmhouse for revenue generating purposes.
- Consider having a horse riding club sponsor the horse campground similar to “adopt a highway” program to assist with projects and upkeep.
- Bury utilities lines where feasible.
- Consider developing a handicap accessible fishing site for wheelchairs; otherwise encourage anglers to disperse along the stream.

### **Trails and Parking**

- Eliminate the service road on the hillside and restore the landscape to oak-savanna or oak-basswood forest.
- Harden the creek bottom and banks at the ford crossing to minimize erosion and siltation.
- Replace the railing on the service road bridge.



The bridge railings need to be replaced to improve safety of the Fort Ridgely Creek crossing. Photo by Bruce Eng, DNR

# **PARK BOUNDARY**

Fort Ridgely State Park includes approximately 1,040 acres. Of that total, approximately 492 acres are in state ownership and 548 acres are privately owned.

Three private landowners requested that their land be included in the park boundary, all in Township 112 North, Range 32 West, in Renville County. These parcels total 467.22 acres (190 acres-Beltz, 165 acres-Firle, and 112.22 acres-Marlowe). Renville County Board passed a resolution in support of the action on August 8, 2000. The Minnesota State Legislature added these three parcels to the park statutory boundary in 2001. These parcels are included in the acreage described above. (See Figure 4 – Park Statutory Boundary and Boundary Issues.)

Of the lands added to the park statutory boundary in 2001, DNR acquired 15 acres containing the Valley View Campground in 2002.

These lands offer opportunities for resource protection and restoration and for improving recreation offerings at the state park as outlined in the Natural and Cultural Resources and Recreational Use and Visitor Services sections above.

Beyond the additions to the park statutory boundary made by the Minnesota State Legislature in 2001, two additional boundary issues were discussed during the plan amendment process.

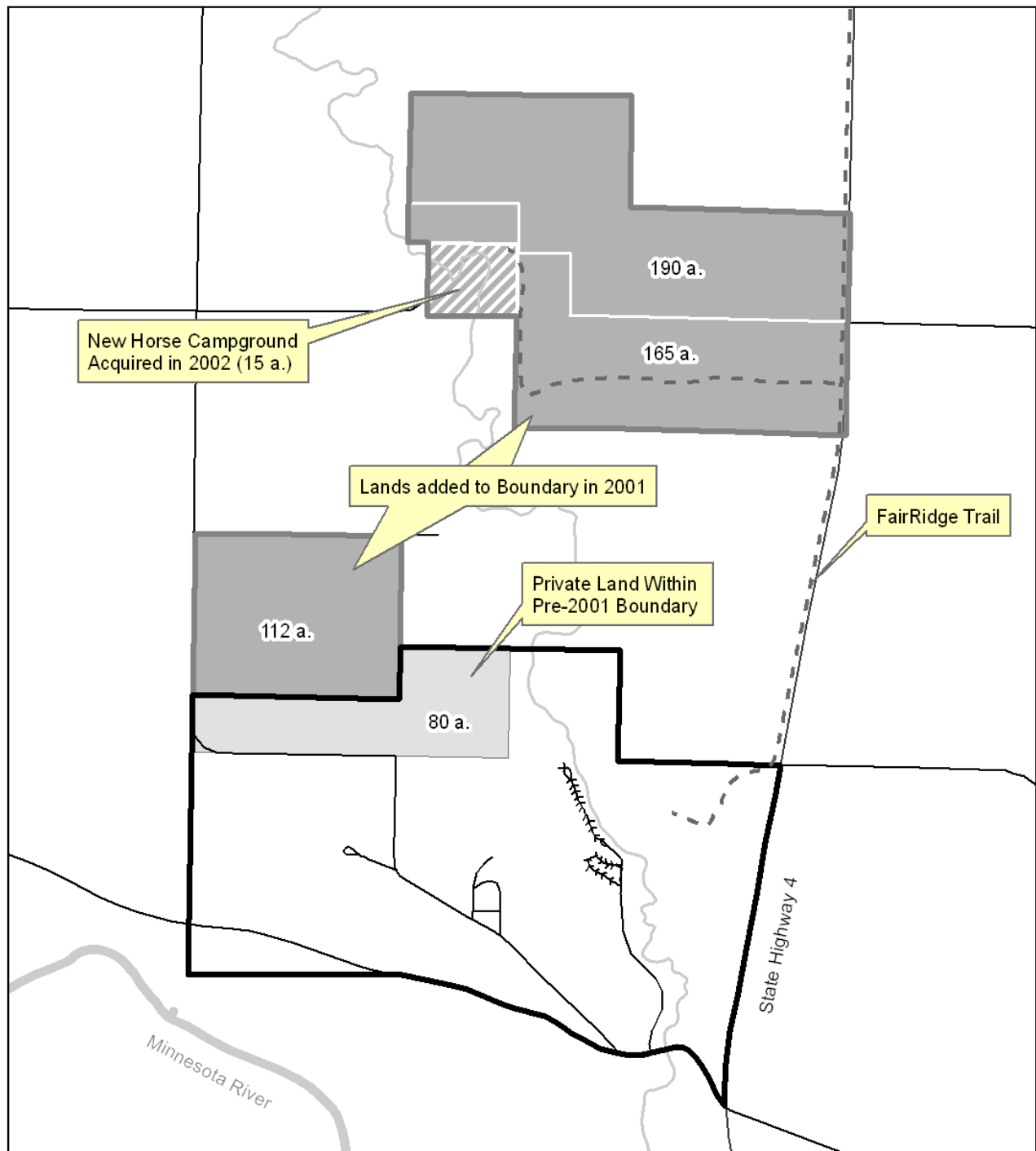
1. Consider addition of 16.3 acres adjacent to the Valley View Campground. The parcel contains a private residence that shares the well with the horse campground. The home also shares the driveway that accesses the campground. Acquisition of the parcel would resolve the water supply issue and remove any future issues related to traffic or disturbance caused by horse campground users.
2. Work with location landowners to assess the feasibility of connecting the two portions of the state park in the future. Connection of the two areas would allow for the development of additional trails, increase native community restoration opportunities, provide increased protection for the Fort Ridgely Creek, and the possibility of consolidating park entrances.

## **Park Boundary Recommendations:**

- Continue to acquire the privately owned properties within the park statutory boundary.
- Consider adding the 16.3-acre private parcel adjacent to the Valley View Campground if acquisition is identified as the preferred option to resolve the water supply issue or to eliminate state park/private landowner concerns.
- Work with location landowners to assess the feasibility of connecting the two portions of the state park in the future.

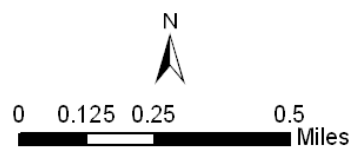
# FORT RIDGELY STATE PARK

Figure 4 - Park Statutory Boundary and Boundary Issues



## Legend

- - - FairRidge Trail
- Roads
- Fort Ridgely Creek
- Park Statutory Boundary
- Boundary Expansion
- Other Private Land



# MANAGEMENT PLAN TEXT REVISIONS

This amendment supplements the Introduction, Natural and Cultural Resources, Recreation Resources, and Proposed Boundary Chapters in the original 1983 Management Plan and supplements the 2000 Fort Ridgely Golf Course Amendment. The text of the amendment should be considered additions to the appropriate sections of the 1983 Management Plan.

*Text to be deleted from the 1983 Management Plan:*

Proposed Boundary Modification, p. 35 (entire section) and Boundary Modifications Map, p. 53

## PUBLIC REVIEW

The plan amendment process had a series of steps:

1. The proposed change was reviewed at the park and regional level. It was determined which stakeholders potentially had major concerns and how those concerns should be addressed. The issues were resolved with input from the public. The proposed changes were then reviewed with the DNR Division of Parks and Recreation, Central Office Management Team.
2. Since the proposed changes involved other DNR Divisions, the issues were resolved by field staff and approved by the affected Regional Managers.
3. Since the proposed changes involved other state agencies including the State Historic Preservation Office and the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the issues were resolved by staff, with input from the public, approved by the Division of Parks and Recreation Central Office Management Team, and reviewed by the Regional Managers.
4. Since the proposed changes were potentially controversial among elected boards, park user groups, adjacent landowners and the public, an open house was held that was advertised in the local and regional area.
5. All plan amendments were coordinated, documented, and distributed by the DNR Division of Parks and Recreation Planning Staff.

These steps were followed during the plan amendment process.. A public open house was held on May 17, 2004. Discussion and correspondences were held with the State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Department of Transportation, and the DNR Divisions of Trails and Waterways, Fish and Wildlife, and Forestry. The Department of Natural Resources Regional Interdisciplinary Review System provided comments on the draft amendment in November 2005.