

# Cuyuna County State Recreation Area

## Management Plan and Recreation Implementation Plan Amendment

### Trail System Expansion, Support Feature Development



Minnesota Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Parks and Trails  
September 2016

# Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan and Recreation Implementation Plan Amendment

This plan amendment has been prepared as required by 2010 Minnesota Laws Chapter 86A.09, Subdivision 1.

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# Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

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## **Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Approval of Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan and Recreation Implementation Plan Amendment**

Minnesota Statutes, Section 86A.09, requires that a master plan be prepared for units of Minnesota's outdoor recreation system, including state parks and recreation areas. The Laws of Minnesota for 1993 established Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area as part of Minnesota's Outdoor Recreation System (MS 85.013, Subd. 5c).

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources interdisciplinary team developed the plan amendment in collaboration with the Cuyuna Country Citizen Advisory Council and other stakeholders. The plan amendment received input and comments from the public during a 30-day public review period and an open house meeting held in Ironton, MN.

The Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan and Recreation Implementation Plan Amendment has been reviewed and approved by the Division of Parks and Trails and by the Northeast Regional Management Team.

*Erika Rivers*

Erika Rivers, Director  
MNDNR, Division of Parks and Trails

*9/16/2016*

Date



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## Executive Summary

The following document amends the *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan* (1995) and the *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Recreation Implementation Plan* (2008), which make recommendations for development of the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area (CCSRA).

The CCSRA provides a range of recreational opportunities in a culturally and geologically significant area. The unit is located in Crow Wing County in northeast Minnesota and is characterized by a mine pit-dotted landscape surrounded by regenerating forest.

To meet visitor demands, the CCSRA will provide new trailheads and trail facilities. Other major recommendations include yurt development in the Yawkey management unit and identifying future development interest in the Maroco backcountry area.

The following amendment presents background information for the recommended facilities development and system changes. This plan amendment provides the basic direction for the CCSRA and is not intended to provide specific management or development details. It will be necessary to resolve any management or operational issues between different disciplines before proposed development projects are approved.

### System Plan Designation and Implementation

In 2015, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Division of Parks and Trails completed the *Minnesota State Parks and Trails System Plan* to advance new approaches to managing state parks and recreation areas, trails, forest recreation areas, and water recreation opportunities. The system plan recommends a differentiated approach to managing this system, which involves identifying investment groups using a set of established criteria.

State parks and state recreation areas are divided into three investment groups: Destination, Core, and Rustic. The CCSRA was designated as a Core state recreation area, and further identified as an Adventure state recreation area.

The Core investment group represents state parks and recreation areas that exemplify the typical visitor experience. It provides “close-to-home, basic, and high-quality facilities that visitors have come to know and expect.” Adventure parks and recreation areas fill a specific recreational niche; in this case, the CCSRA focuses on the mountain biking recreational niche by providing excellent, nationally-recognized off-road bicycling opportunities.

The focus on mountain biking at the CCSRA and the enhancements discussed in this amendment are consistent with the system plan’s designation of the SRA and objective to “focus on attracting new users to adventurous recreation opportunities through targeted outreach, programming, and special events.”

### CORE PARKS AND RECREATION AREAS

*The Core group represents the typical visitor experience provided across much of the system: close-to-home, basic, high-quality facilities that visitors have come to know and expect.*

## Introduction

Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area (CCSRA) is located in northeast Minnesota, near the communities of Crosby and Ironton. It sits on roughly 5,000 acres of undeveloped land within one of Minnesota's three great iron ranges, the Cuyuna Iron Range, which extends almost 70 miles through Morrison, Crow Wing, and Aitkin counties. The mining history of the CCSRA transformed the pit-dotted landscape into something foreign to the surrounding area, making Cuyuna Country an attraction to visitors year-round. The crystal clear water in the fifteen former mine pits and the 25 miles of shoreline along the area's natural lakes make this a spectacular recreational site.

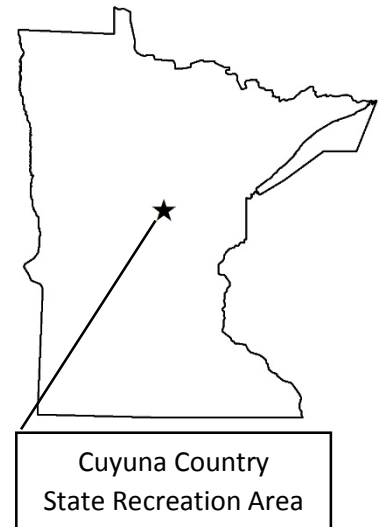
Over the last 20 years, the DNR has completed several plans for the CCSRA, including:

- *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan* (December 1995);
- *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan Amendment* (July 2005); and
- *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Recreation Implementation Plan* (April 2008).

The purpose of these plans was to first, develop an overall vision and concept for the unit, and to supplement that with a more detailed recreation plan. As required in *Minnesota Statutes* 86A.05, subd. 3, the purpose of a state recreation area is to "provide a broad selection of outdoor recreation opportunities in a natural setting which may be used by large numbers of people."

Creation of the CCSRA was a collaborative effort between the Iron Range Resources Rehabilitation Board (IRRRB), volunteer groups, local governments, and the DNR, with official designation as a state recreation area in 1993.

The CCSRA offers a variety of recreation opportunities to the public and averages more than 118,000 annual visits. Recreation enthusiasts can take advantage of the many recreational facilities within the CCSRA including three yurts in the Yawkey Unit, 35 electric/non-electric sites in the Portsmouth Campground, self-guided tours through the historic Croft Mine, six natural and 15 mine pit lakes, and over 25 miles of multi- and single-use trails. Some of the most popular activities among CCSRA visitors are mountain biking, scuba diving, and hiking. For general orientation and wayfinding see Figure 1, which was developed in cooperation with local partners. Other DNR-managed facilities near the CCSRA include the Clint Converse Campground in Land O' Lakes State Forest and Pelican Beach Day-Use Area and Greer Lake Campground in Crow Wing State Forest.

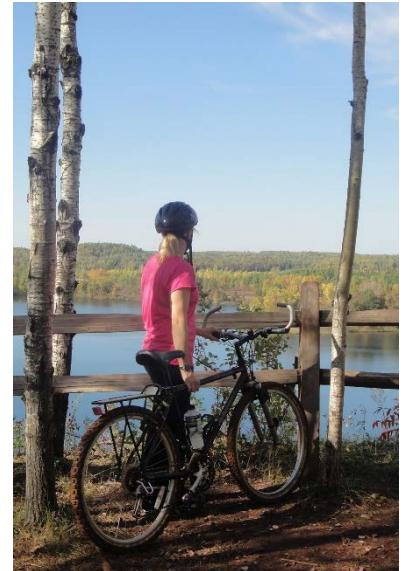


***Mountain Biking and Off-Road Cycling at Cuyuna Country SRA***

Mountain biking is a popular activity at the CCSRA. Riders come from all over the state and country to experience the trails.

There are more than 25 miles of mountain bike trails, boasting scenic vistas and exciting turns throughout 800 acres within the CCSRA boundary. These trails are predominately concentrated in the Mahnommen Unit to the north of Huntington Mine Lake, but also extend into the Portsmouth, Yawkey, and Sagamore Units. They range in level of difficulty from “Easiest” to “Extremely Difficult,” allowing for a range of interests and skill levels to experience the trails. The Cuyuna Lakes State Trail is an eight-mile long paved trail that travels through the CCSRA from the City of Crosby to Riverton. It provides additional opportunities for scenic recreational bicycling and makes connections between different use areas within the unit.

Winter provides another opportunity for cycling at the CCSRA. Fat biking in Minnesota has been growing in popularity, extending the bicycle-riding season year-round. The CCSRA offers 20 miles of groomed trails dedicated to a premier fat biking experience. These trails are focused in the Sagamore Unit to the north of Sagamore Mine Lake. There are three “Easy” groomed trails around the lake, and several “More Difficult” groomed trails branching off within the unit. For more details, see Figure 2: Existing Trails.



## Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this plan amendment is to address the future addition of mountain bike trails and facilities within the CCSRA. Some of these proposed modifications could result in changes to public use, access, programming, resources, and operations within the unit. The amendment is intended to provide DNR staff and partners with direction on:

1. the expansion of, and adjustments to, the mountain bike trail system;
2. the development of trailheads for easier trail access; and
3. the development of facilities to support SRA visitors.

Management plans are required for state park and state recreation area units. *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09, subd. 4 requires that construction of facilities and other development conform to the management plan. This amendment will bring the management plan into accordance with current programming and development proposals for the CCSRA.



## Description

The proposed projects will enhance the quality of the visitors' experiences and the recreational impact of the CCSRA within the broader community. The trails proposed in this plan amendment will be used primarily by mountain bicyclists. Development is shown in more detail in Figure 3.

### ***Trail System Expansion***

The mountain bike trail system will be expanded in the CCSRA, with development within each of the four management units, but primarily focused in the Mahnomen, Portsmouth, and Yawkey Units. New trails and development discussed in this plan amendment will allow users to access and connect to the Cuyuna Lakes State Trail (CLST), which serves as an important link in the trail network.

New mountain bike trails will be developed in the Mahnomen and Portsmouth Units. This includes new alignments that extend to existing trails and connect with other anticipated developments.

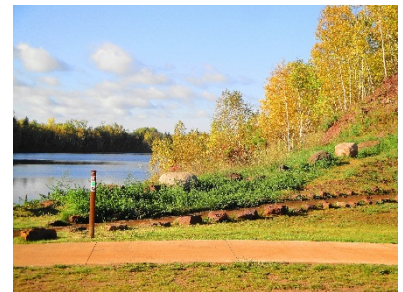
A skills area to the northeast of Huntington Mine Lake will be established in the Mahnomen Unit. This will be a technical skill building zone, representing challenges that are typically encountered while riding the existing mountain bike trails system within the CCSRA. This will complement the existing and newly proposed mountain bike trails and improve visitor use in the area.

There is additional development potential in the Maroco backcountry area to the north of the Mahnomen Unit. This area could provide an opportunity expand the mountain bike trail system within the CCSRA; however, any projects would need to be assessed for their potential impacts on existing natural and cultural resources.

Development of trails in this area would require a permanent means of access. Currently, an abandoned railroad right-of-way extends from the Huntington Feigh Mines to the northern shores of Mahnomen and Little Mahnomen Lakes. The 1995 management plan outlines a potential road alignment along this track that would provide recreational access to this area. However, additional investigation into the feasibility of this route would need to be completed before development could commence.

To improve trail experiences, some trails within the CCSRA will be redesigned for one-way travel. For example, an existing two-way trail called Easy Street will be converted to a one-way trail to improve visitor safety.

The possibility of further developing trails in the Sagamore Unit will also be considered. Growth potential in this unit includes completion of an existing trail loop around Sagamore Mine Lake. Though the lake is not entirely within the statutory boundary of the CCSRA, cooperative agreements with Crow Wing



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County and other land owners should be considered in order to complete a continuous, one-way alignment around the lake.

***Trailhead and Support Facilities Development***

Four new trailheads will be developed within three management areas of the CCSRA. The locations of these trailheads as outlined in this plan are approximate and have the potential to be relocated, as needed.

1. A primary trailhead, or Rally Center, will be located to the east of Huntington Mine Lake to access the proposed mountain bike skills area and trails to the north of the lake.
2. A trailhead will be located to the west of Huntington Mine Lake that will provide improved amenities, access to the mountain bike skills area, and access to the Cuyuna Lakes State Trail.
3. A trailhead will be developed in the Portsmouth Unit to the east of Portsmouth Mine Lake. The temporary trailhead on the west side of Highway 6 will be eliminated as part of this trailhead project.
4. Another trailhead will be established in the Yawkey Unit offering the same amenities as the others. In addition to this trailhead, two small group campsites will be developed and two additional yurts will be added to the three that are already located near Yawkey Mine Lake. This will allow for expanded overnight use and help meet increasing demands at the CCSRA. To create more recreation opportunities in the area, there will be an improved carry-in access point for Yawkey Mine Lake.

Amenities and support facilities at trailheads typically include:

- Parking
- Vault toilets
- Information kiosks
- Shelters and picnic tables
- Trash receptacles
- Potable water

Some of these amenities already exist at trailhead locations, while some have yet to be built. These support facilities, in combination with the trailheads, can bring increased use to the CCSRA and provide alternatives to existing trail access points.

***Natural and Cultural Resources Impact***

Recommendations for the management of natural and cultural resources can be found in the *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan*. Before any development begins, the Division of Parks and Trails conducts resource assessments of both natural and cultural resources in the project area to evaluate potential resource impacts of proposed projects.



### **Geology and Mining**

The 1995 master plan provides the following information regarding the unique natural resources at the CCSRA:

*“There are currently three resources existing in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area which may lead to future mining within the recreation boundary: construction rock, natural iron ore (nonmagnetic), and Manganese ore. Construction rock is the most likely resource to be mined in the next 25 years, but the remaining Manganese Ore deposits have the highest potential for long-term mining. There is also potential for exploration and mining of non-ferrous metallic minerals.”*

To resolve any future resource conflicts the Division of Parks and Trails will follow a process to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts to mining resources. The Division of Parks and Trails will work with the Division of Lands and Minerals to avoid any unnecessary impacts to tailings basins and mineral stockpiles. According to the *Laws of Minnesota for 1993* (Ch 172 Sec. 34 Subd.1 85.013 Subd.5c. Subd.3):

*“The commissioner shall recognize the possibility that mining may be conducted in the future within the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area and that the use of portions of the surface estate and control of the flowage of water may be necessary for future mining operations.”*

Both the 1995 master plan and the 2008 recreation plan discuss the future mining potential of the Cuyuna Range in further detail and provide maps showing existing resources and possible mining sites at the CCSRA. The CCSRA land ownership is shown in Figure 4 and existing iron stockpiles are shown in Figure 5. Upon request, more information and mining potential maps are available from the DNR Division of Lands and Minerals ([mndnr.gov/lands\\_minerals](http://mndnr.gov/lands_minerals)).

### **Natural Resources Impact**

Due to the intense mining history of the Cuyuna area, the remaining above-ground natural resources and plant communities are scarce or regenerating. The CCSRA land cover is composed primarily of non-natural systems, with the occasional Wet Meadow or Fire Dependent Forest system around the property boundaries. See Figure 6: Native Plant Communities for more detail. The development outlined in this plan amendment will typically stay in and around the already disturbed landscapes in the CCSRA.

There are many natural lakes as well as mine pit lakes that host spectacular scuba diving opportunities and provide habitat to aquatic species. The Division of Parks and Trails will minimize any impacts to water resources or water recreation opportunities at the CCSRA through project design.



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A few specific concerns in relation to trail development include erosion on both trails and shoreline; invasive species management, many of which are already present; and impacts to endangered, threatened, or special concern species (including potential bat hibernaculum or roost trees). For rare species guides, refer to the 1995 master plan or the 2004 *Cuyuna Lakes State Trail Master Plan*.

The Rabbit River, which flows through the middle of the Mahnomen Unit, has also been identified as an area of special concern. If development in this area were to occur, the Division of Parks and Trails would need to first do a thorough investigation of the natural and cultural resources along the river and shoreline.

The increase in public use and trail density from developments proposed in this plan amendment could affect access to two parcels managed for timber. The Division of Parks and Trails will work cooperatively with the Division of Forestry to facilitate forest management practices or timber sale access as needed.

However, the Division of Parks and Trails does not anticipate impacts to natural resources resulting from proposals contained within this plan amendment.

***Cultural Resources Impact***

The CCSRA contains unrecorded historic mining-related features that include pits and shafts, railroad and road grades, and ditches. Within the Portsmouth Unit, visitors can experience the Croft Mine and the Iron-ton Sintering Plant, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Division of Parks and Trails will protect these features as they are contributing elements to the Cuyuna Iron Range Historic Mining Landscape District. Potential impacts to these cultural resources and adjacent assets will be assessed before any development would occur.

However, the Division of Parks and Trails does not anticipate any impacts to cultural resources at the CCSRA.

***Interpretive Services Impact***

The interpretive services projects addressed in this plan amendment include orientation signage and information kiosks at trailheads. Context-specific information for signs and kiosks can be developed with local partners. Division standards and best practices for wayfinding and trail user orientation will be implemented throughout the CCSRA.

These signage improvements will increase the quality of interpretive services at the CCSRA, creating a more enjoyable visit. Increased opportunity for wayfinding and interpretation in the CCSRA are important, especially given the number of recreational units and the complexities of the trail network within the SRA.



### **Recreational Use and Visitor Services Impact**

The projects outlined in this plan amendment will enhance user experiences and improve visitor safety. Trail development will serve to satisfy increasing demand for additional mountain biking opportunities within the CCSRA, while the interpretive projects will increase visitor awareness and stewardship within the unit.

#### ***Trail Users***

The addition of the Portsmouth and Huntington trailheads will encourage more visitors to ride new and existing trail routes. It will make trail-specific parking more accessible and improve the flow of visitors to and from key facilities.

Riders will benefit from improvements to the existing trail system, including the addition of single-directional trails and adjustments to trail alignment. They will also benefit from new amenities like the skills area north of Huntington Mine Lake. Trail access points may change for the recreational users because of the amended trail directionality.

In the Sagamore Unit, mountain biking was developed instead of the horse trails originally envisioned in the 1995 Management Plan and the 2008 Recreation Implementation Plan. This reduces the equestrian-related opportunities within the CCSRA. However, horseback riding opportunities still exist on the unpaved Cuyuna Lakes State Trail, and there are many alternative equestrian trail opportunities within the 50 mile area surrounding the CCSRA. The Division of Parks and Trails considers the proposed changes included in this plan amendment to be a minor impact to existing and future horseback riding opportunities. As design and layout of mountain bike trails occurs, the Division of Parks and Trails should pursue the possibility for horseback riding as a use in these areas in the future.

Other trail uses will not be affected to any appreciable degree by proposed changes in the trail system.

#### ***Campers***

A former day use area will be expanded to allow for new overnight use opportunities, which will increase with the addition of two yurts in the Yawkey Unit. The development of additional support facilities like vault toilets and information kiosks will provide an attractive amenity to the users of the existing yurt campground.



## Management Plan and Recreation Implementation Plan Text Revisions

This plan amendment affects the *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan* (1995) with regards to two sections in the **Proposed Development** section of **Chapter IV Recreation Resources**:

- This plan amendment will amend **Topic 3. Camping, Action 2. Develop a primitive group camp in the Yawkey Mine Lake area.** This plan amendment discusses reprogramming overnight use in this area from a group camp to yurt camping.
- This plan amendment supplements **Topic 4. Summer Trails, Action 1. Provide a summer trail system which accommodates horses, mountain bikes, and hikers.** Additional mountain biking trail opportunities will be included in the Maroco Mine area.

This plan amendment affects the recommendations and actions in two portions of **Section Four – Recreation Related Facilities** of the current *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Recreation Implementation Plan* (April 2008).

- This plan amendment text supplements **1. Trails – Summer Use Trails** portion in the **Day Use Areas** chapter related to the addition of more mountain bike trails.
- This plan amendment also amends **Camping Locations and Types** in the **Overnight Use Areas** chapter to add overnight use and yurts in the Yawkey Mine Area.

## Public Review

In accordance with *Minnesota Statutes* 86A.09, subd. 6, the plan amendment was released on July 28, 2016. A Cuyuna Country Citizen Advisory Council (CAC) meeting was held at the CCSRA park office in Ironton, MN on July 26, 2016. An open house meeting was held at the Ironton City Hall in Ironton, MN on August 23, 2016. Comments received were reviewed and considered as part of the development of the final version of the plan amendment.

Comments were received through mail, email, phone, and in-person at the open house and CAC meetings. Themes from these comments are summarized in the following table. The issues, comments, and concerns included here are thematic and representative of all comments received during the official public review period. This summary does not include every individual comment submitted.

**Table 1: Summary of Public Review**

Public Comment	DNR Response	Explanation
Continue to work toward more single directional trails throughout the SRA trail system.	An expansion of single directional trails is proposed in the amendment. No change to the plan amendment.	The Division will continue to pursue additional trail network changes within the SRA, as needed and as resources are available.
Improve access to lakes within the SRA by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Designating swimming areas</li> <li>Creating accessible fishing piers</li> </ul>	No change to the plan amendment.	DNR will consider future opportunities to expand lake access for users.
Increase signage outside of SRA for improved access.	No change to the plan amendment.	DNR will work with local communities and MnDOT to provide proper signage outside of the SRA boundaries.
Designate camping areas near trails to encourage bike-packing.	No change to the plan amendment.	Beyond yurts, additional overnight use within the SRA is currently not under consideration.
Incorporate more recreational activities and opportunities in plan amendment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gun range</li> <li>Horseback riding</li> </ul>	No change to the plan amendment.	These recreation activities are already considered allowable in both the 1995 management plan and 2008 recreation plan. Opportunities to expand these uses will depend on additional resources.
Provide ATV opportunities within the SRA boundaries.	No change to the plan amendment.	OHV use on the state-owned and administered lands within the SRA boundary is not permitted by Minnesota Rules and is not considered an allowable use in the original management plan.
Support for the Cuyuna Country SRA plan amendment and proposed developments.	No change to the plan amendment.	N/A

## References

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (1995). *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan*. St. Paul, MN: Division of Parks and Recreation.

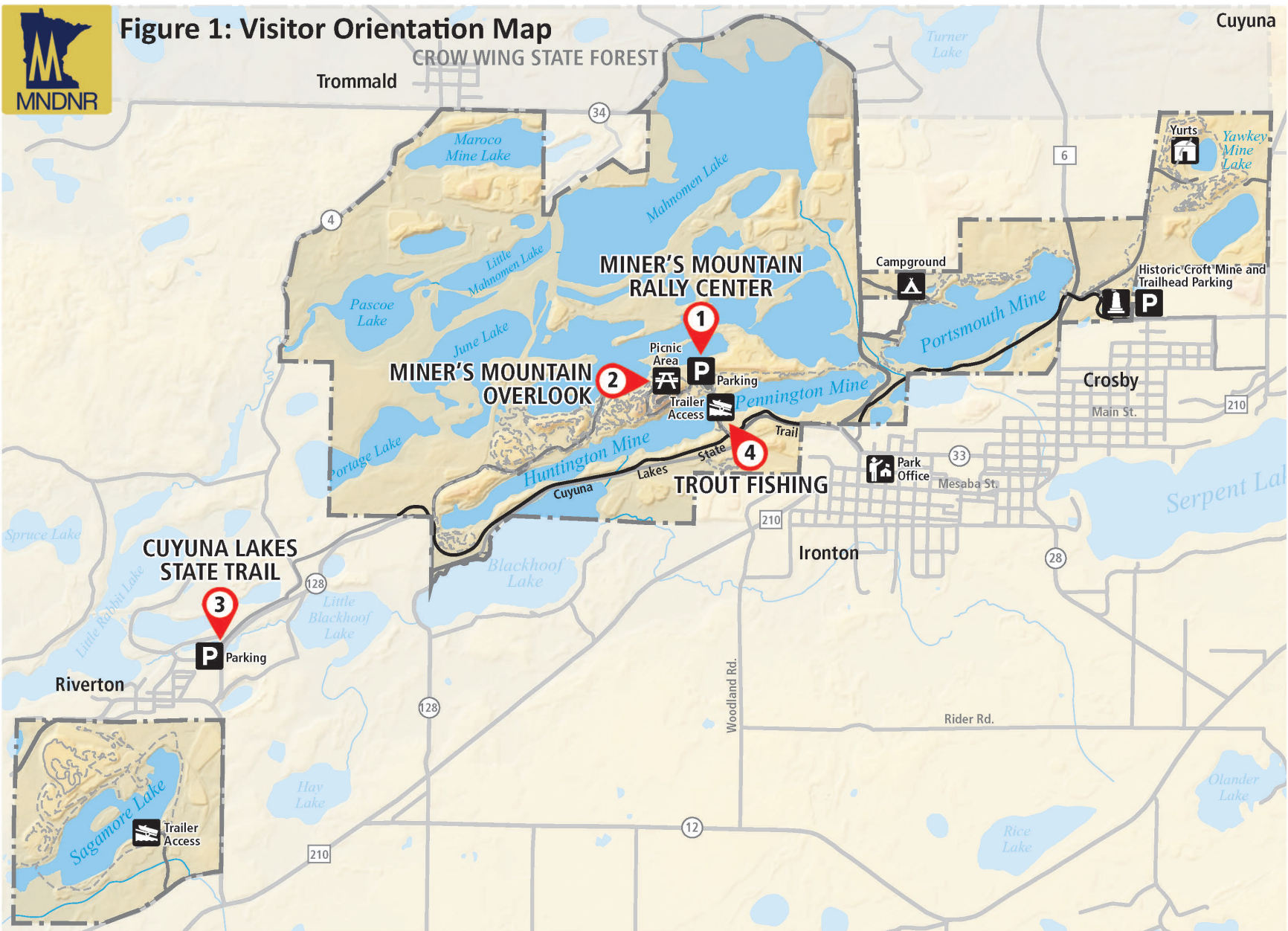
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (2004). *Cuyuna Lakes State Trail Master Plan*. St. Paul, MN: Division of Trails and Waterways.

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (2005). *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Management Plan Amendment*. St. Paul, MN: Division of Parks and Recreation.

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (2008). *Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Recreation Implementation Plan*. St. Paul, MN: Division of Parks and Recreation.

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (2015). *Minnesota State Parks and Trails System Plan, Charting a Course for the Future*. St. Paul, MN: Division of Parks and Trails.

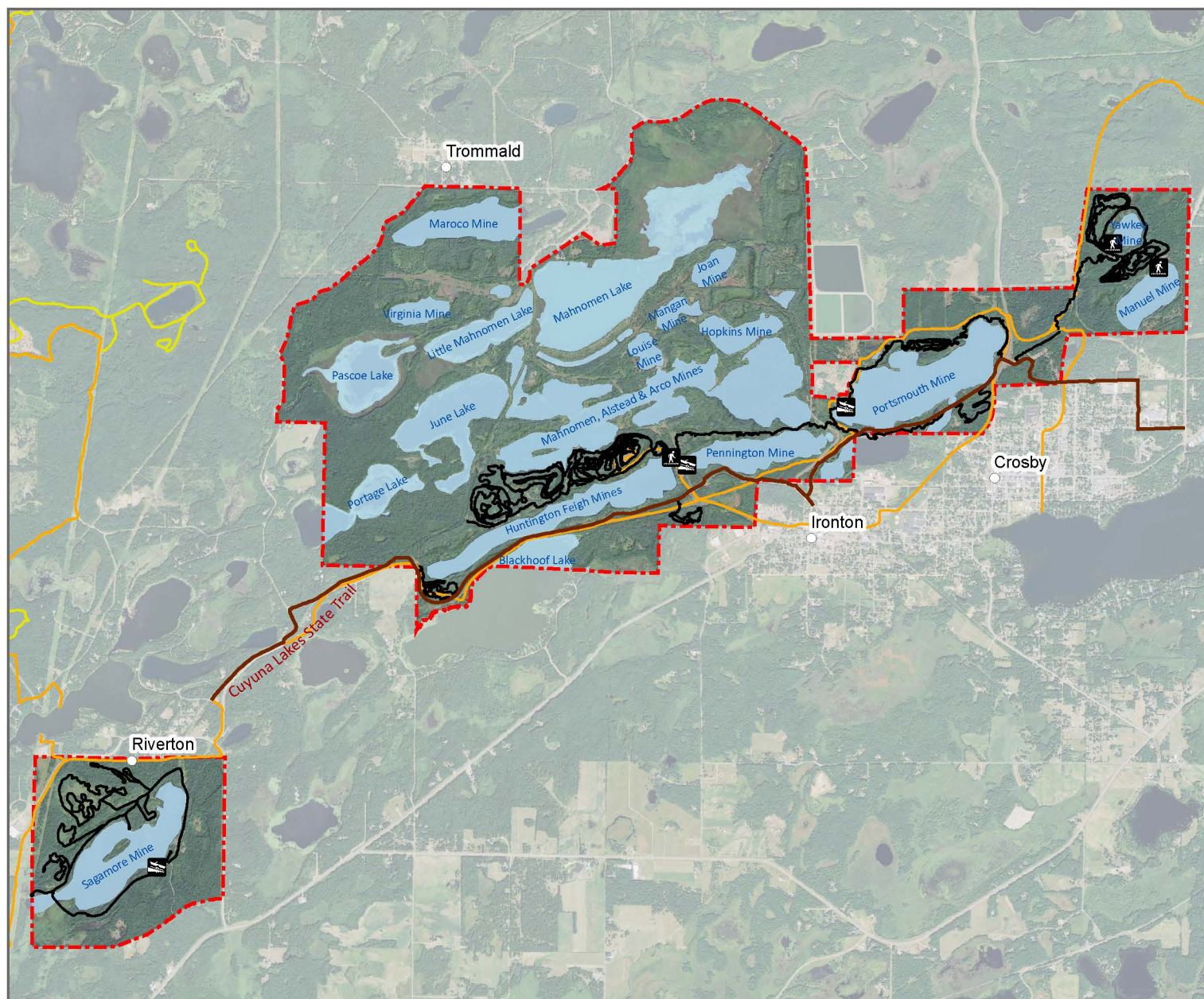






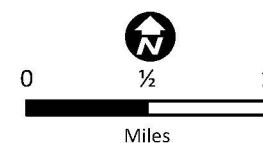
# Cuyuna Country SRA

Figure 2: Existing Trails

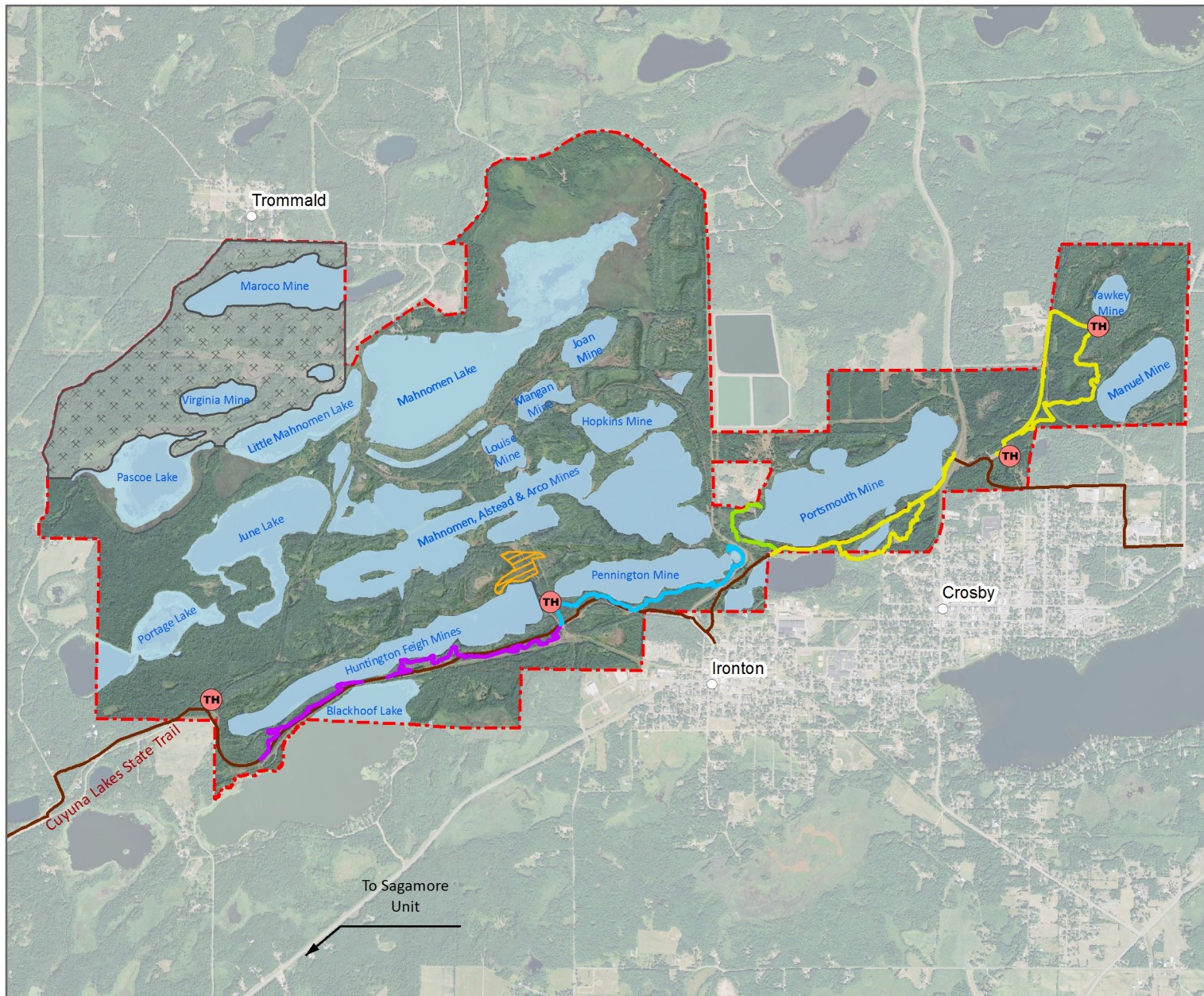


## Legend

- Cuyuna Lakes State Trail
- Mountain Bike Trails
- Minnesota Snowmobile Trails
- Off-Highway Vehicle Use
- Carry-In Public Water Access
- Trailer Launch Public Water Access
- Open Water
- SRA Boundary





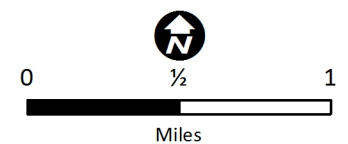
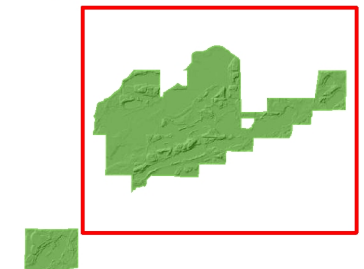


**Cuyuna Country SRA**  
Figure 3: Trail Development

**Legend**

- Approximate Trailhead Location
- Trail completed 2015
- Trail to be built 2017
- Trail to be built 2017
- Trail to be built 2017
- Cuyuna Lakes State Trail
- Skills Area to be built 2017
- Future Development Potential
- Open Water
- SRA Boundary

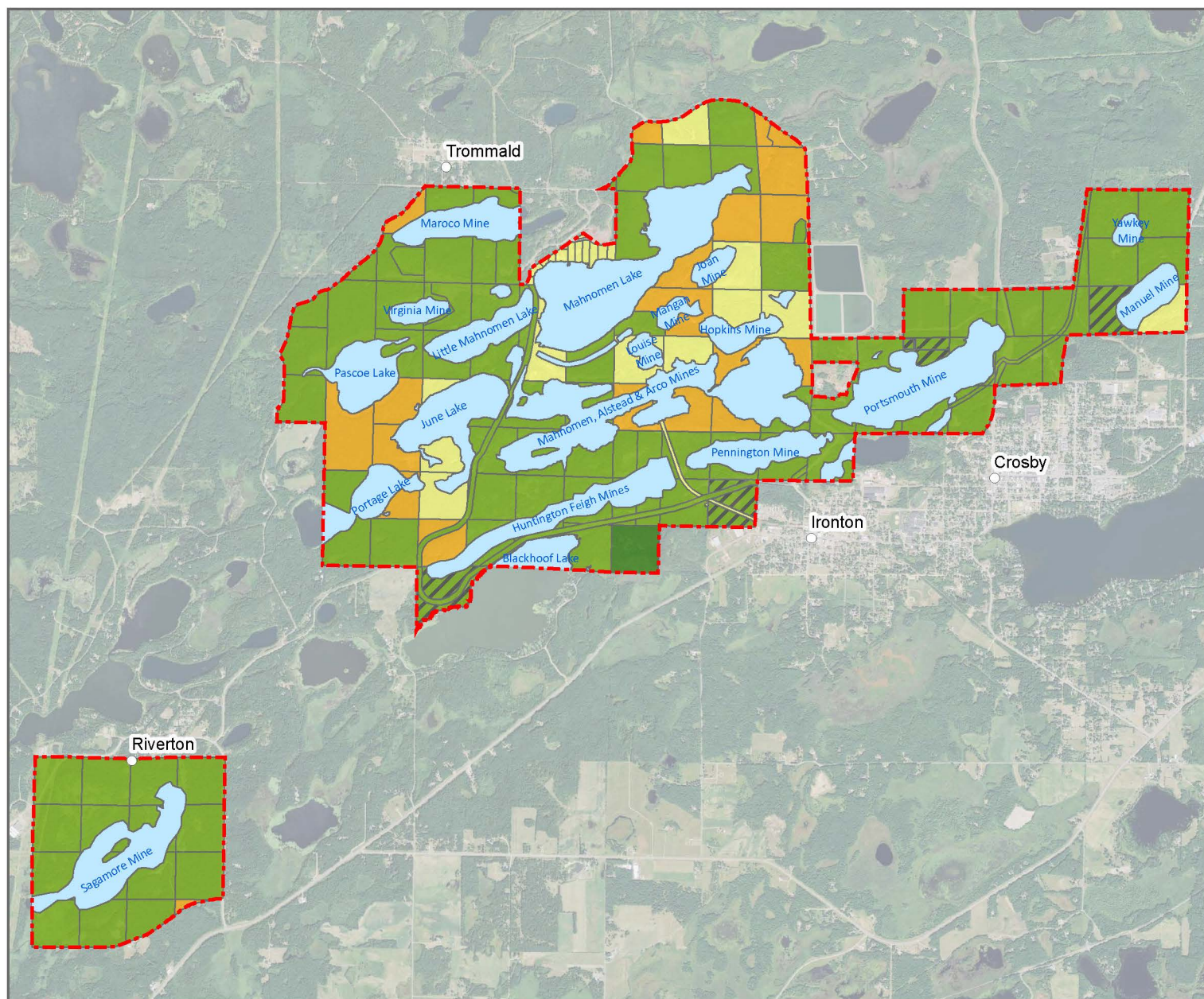
SRA Management Units Shown:  
Mahnomen, Portsmouth, Yawkey





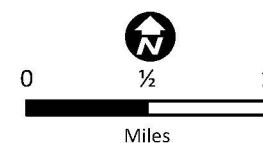
# Cuyuna Country SRA

Figure 4: Land Ownership



## Legend

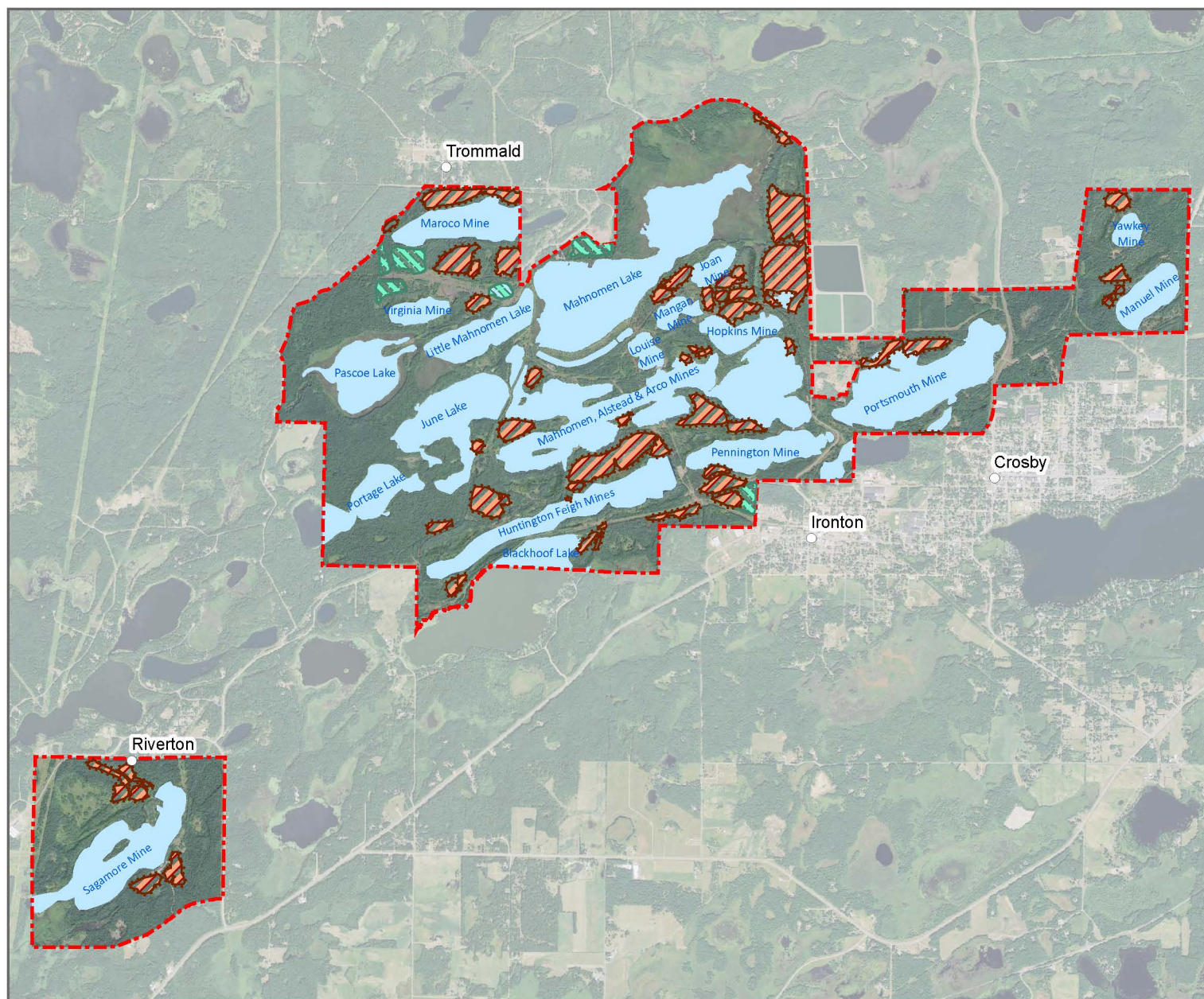
- State
- State Trust Fund
- Private
- Undivided Interests
- State Owned Stockpiles
- Open Water
- SRA Boundary





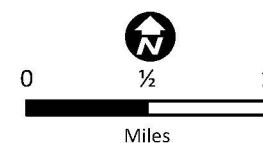
# Cuyuna Country SRA

Figure 5: Iron Resources

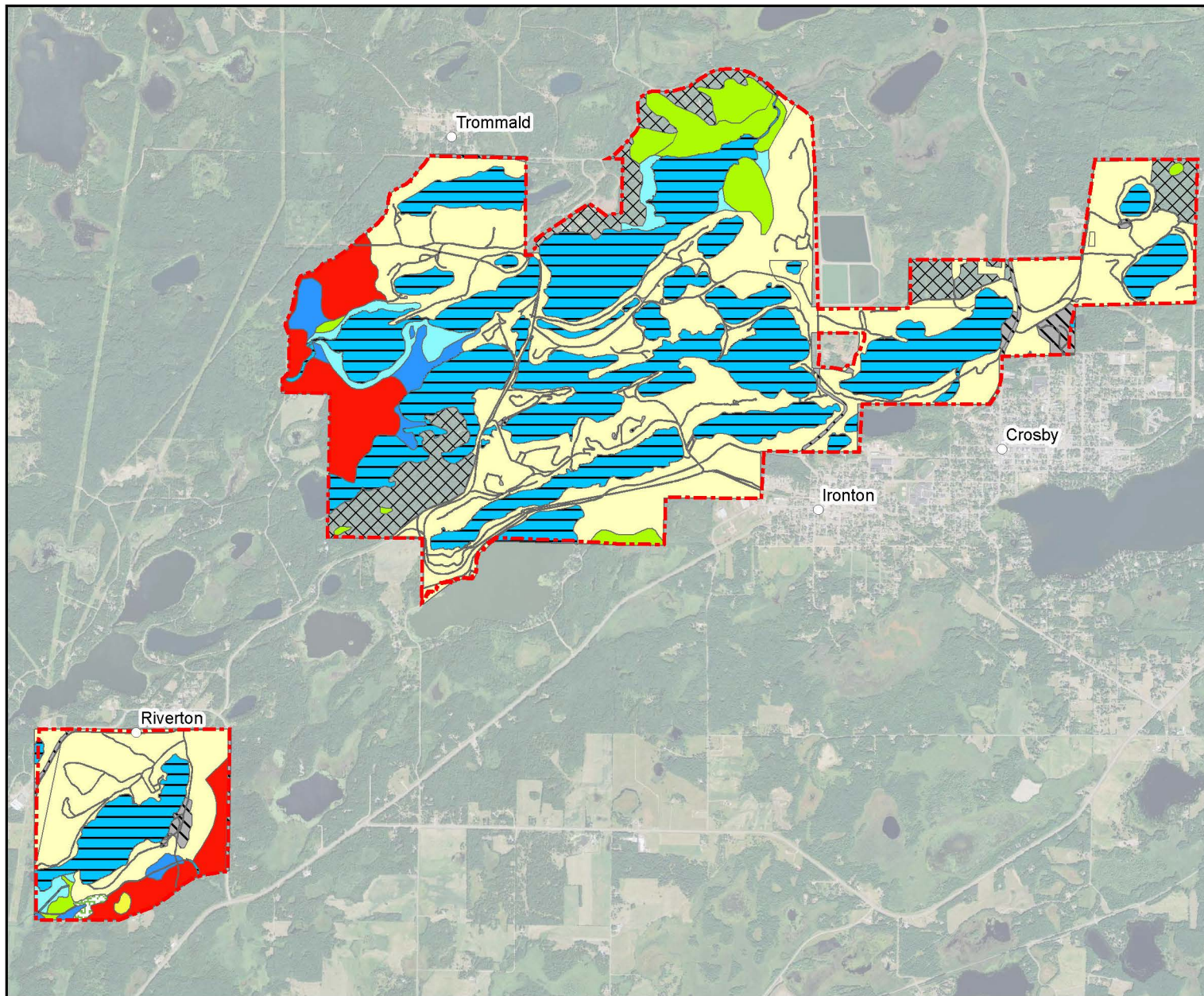


## Legend

- Iron Stockpiles
- Tailings Basins
- Open Water
- SRA Boundary







**Cuyuna Country SRA**  
Figure 6: Native Plant Communities

**Legend**

-  Fire-Dependent Forest/Woodland System
-  Marsh System
-  Upland Prairie System
-  Wet Forest System
-  Wet Meadow/Carr System
-  Complex community
-  Other Natural System
-  Non-Natural System
-  Facilities System
-  Unclassified
-  SRA Boundary

