

# Split Rock Creek State Park Management Plan Amendment

Horse Campground, Day Use Area, and Trail Connections



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

**May 2012**



## Division of Parks and Trails Approval of Management Plan Amendment for Split Rock Creek State Park

The Division of Parks and Trails 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 2003 Split Rock Creek State Park management plan identifies a more suitable location for a proposed horse campground and trailhead, identifies a site for a temporary horse trail day use parking area, and related changes in the siting of horse trails and phasing of other equestrian improvements.

Horse trails have already been developed in the park, consistent with the recommendations of the 2003 management plan. Addition of the day use area will facilitate use of these trails, which will attract a new group of park visitors and will result in more repeat visits. It is consistent with the Division's goal of expanding opportunities for equestrian facilities within the existing state system.

The amendment received input and comment both within the Department of Natural Resources and from the public. It went through a public review period, including an open house held at the park, and was approved by the Southern Region and Division of Parks and Trails management. Public comments were uniformly positive and enthusiastic.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Courtland Nelson".

Courtland Nelson, Director  
Division of Parks and Trails

A handwritten date in blue ink, "8 May 12".

Date



# Split Rock Creek State Park Management Plan Amendment

## Horse Campground, Day Use Area, and Trail Connections



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

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

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

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## PURPOSE

The purpose of this management plan amendment is to update Split Rock Creek State Park's 2003 management plan in order to identify a new, more suitable location for a horse campground and trailhead, a site for a temporary horse day use parking lot, and related changes in the phasing of equestrian improvements. The plan amendment also identifies specific connections to the Casey Jones State Trail in order to create additional opportunities for horseback riding around the park.

Management plans are required for state park units. *Minnesota Statutes*, section 86A.09, subd. 4 requires that the 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 park.

## BACKGROUND AND DIRECTION FROM PREVIOUS PLANS

Split Rock Creek State Park is located in far southwestern corner of Minnesota in the Inner Coteau Ecological Subsection, an area that was virtually covered in prairie prior to European settlement. The park was established in 1937 as the Split Rock Creek Recreation Reserve, in conjunction with construction of a large dam by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to provide water-based recreation in a region with few natural water bodies.

In 1996 the park's statutory boundary was expanded from about 300 acres to approximately 1,300 acres. This expansion led to the development of the park's Management Plan, completed in 2003. A second addition of 150 acres occurred in 2006. Today, the statutory boundary is approximately 1,450 acres, of which about 1,000 acres are currently in state ownership.

The management plan recommended several actions related to horse trail, trailhead and campground development within the park, as listed below:

### **Action #23 Develop a horse trail system**

A horse trail system will be developed that provides a high quality recreational experience that can be maintained without adversely affecting the restoration of the prairie environment. A series of loop trails that are primarily on the uplands, with good views of Split Rock Creek and the surrounding countryside will be developed. This would be a maximum of 6.5 miles of trail. This trail system will provide a good opportunity to experience and learn about the prairie environment. It will be designed to be a safe trail system that can be enjoyed by both novice and experienced riders. The Division of Parks and Recreation does not have the authority to build trails outside of the Split Rock Creek State Park statutory boundary. There is not enough room within Split Rock Creek State Park to provide for a day-long horse ride experience. The park trails will have to be used in conjunction with adjacent county or township roads for an entire day of riding. There is the potential to develop a trail connection from Split Rock Creek State Park

to the Casey Jones State Trail that would provide a diversity of off-road riding experiences. For this connection to be implemented, it would have to be pursued by the MnDNR Bureau of Trails and Waterways with the support of local citizens.

**Action #24 Develop a horse campground**

The horse campground will be built south of Split Rock Lake. This site has suitable soils for this development, is not very visible except in distant views from the rest of the park, is in an area which does not have high quality prairie, provides good access to the future trail system, and is in an area where trees and shade will be suitable. The vision for the land west of County Road 20 will be restored prairie, while this atmosphere is appropriate for trail use, the campground and trail head will be much more comfortable for visitors if it is shaded. The area in the vicinity of Split Rock Lake (not a natural feature) can appropriately be managed for recreational use and visitor comfort. To protect Split Rock Creek shoreline from erosion, the horse campground will be designed so horse rider access to the shore is restricted.

**Action #25 Develop a horse trailhead**

The horse rider trailhead will be developed near, but separated from the horse campground. The trailhead will have a parking lot, unloading ramp, tie rails, and potable water. It will provide for day use access to the trail system. Some facilities may be shared with the campground, but it will be designed so day use visitors can enjoy the park without imposing on campers.

**Action #26 Recommend connection to the Casey Jones State Trail**

The Casey Jones State Trail was initially authorized to run between Lake Shetek State Park and Pipestone. The 2002 Legislative Session authorized an extension of the Casey Jones State Trail from Pipestone to Split Rock Creek State Park. The final trail when completed will be seventy miles long from Ihlen, across Pipestone and Murray counties, to Walnut Grove in Redwood County, connecting eight cities and two state parks. It would be very desirable for Split Rock Creek State Park trail users to have access to the Casey Jones State Trail. Access to this trail will greatly expand the recreational opportunities available for park visitors. An alignment has not been identified for this connection. Although state park staff do not have the authority to identify the proposed alignment except within the State Park Statutory Boundary, they will work with Division of Trails and Waterways staff and the local community to connect the park to the existing trail alignment. The easiest connection to the park seems to be adjacent to County 20 at the south edge of Ihlen, or to connect from the east along the former township road between Sections 16 and 22.

Figure 2 below shows the proposed developments in the Management Plan.

Since the plan was completed, several relevant changes have occurred. The Casey Jones State Trail Master Plan was completed in 2005, indicating several potential alignments between Pipestone and Split Rock Creek State Park. The trail master plan recommends two alignments for this segment: a paved trail for hikers and bicyclists and a natural-surface horse trail. The plan shows a potential horse trail corridor following Township Road 101 and a short segment of U.S. 75 south from Pipestone to Township Road 7 (21<sup>st</sup> Street) to the southern boundary of the park, a distance of about 12 miles. Figure 3 is taken from the master plan showing this trail segment.

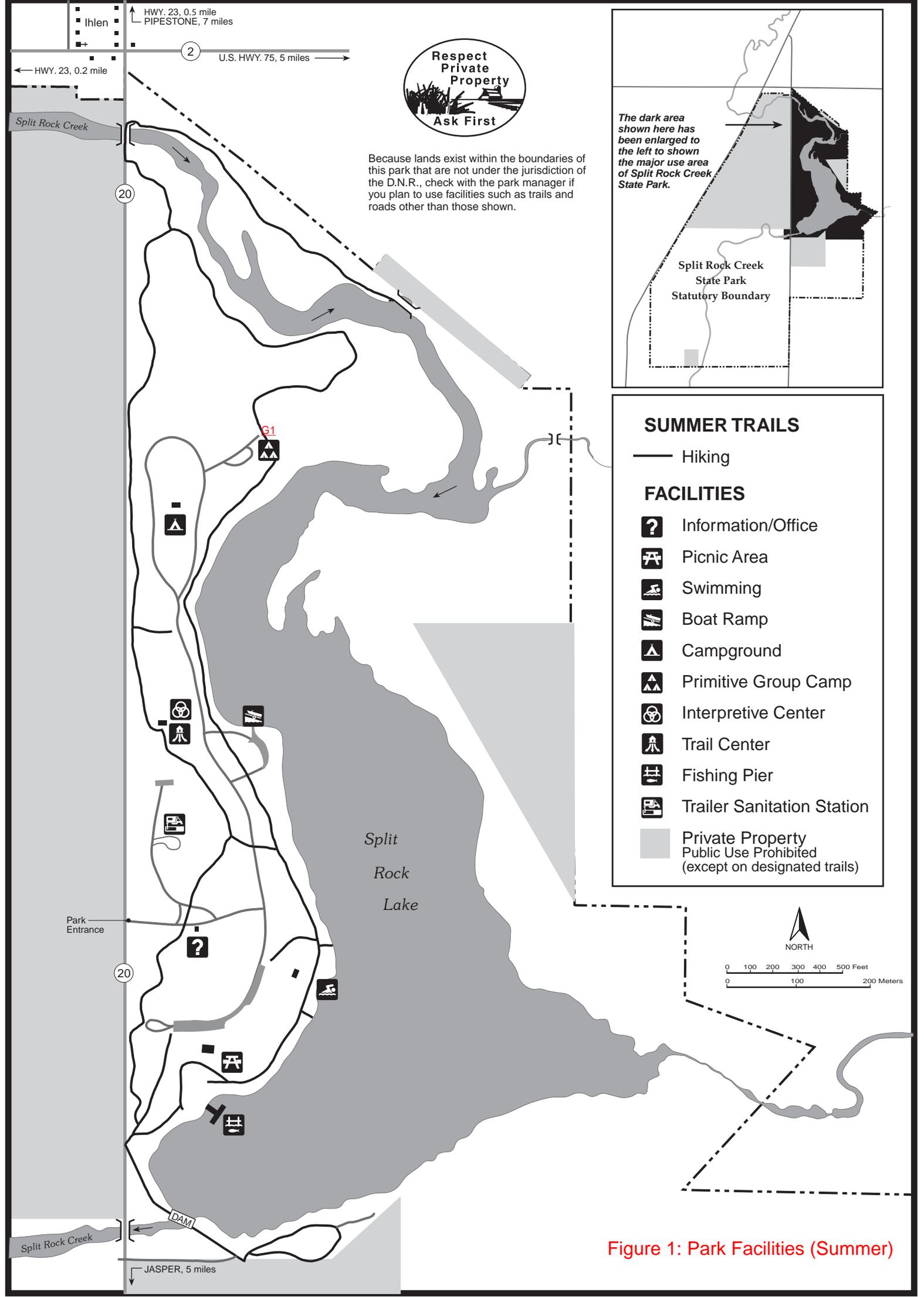


Figure 1: Park Facilities (Summer)

# Split Rock Creek State Park Proposed Development

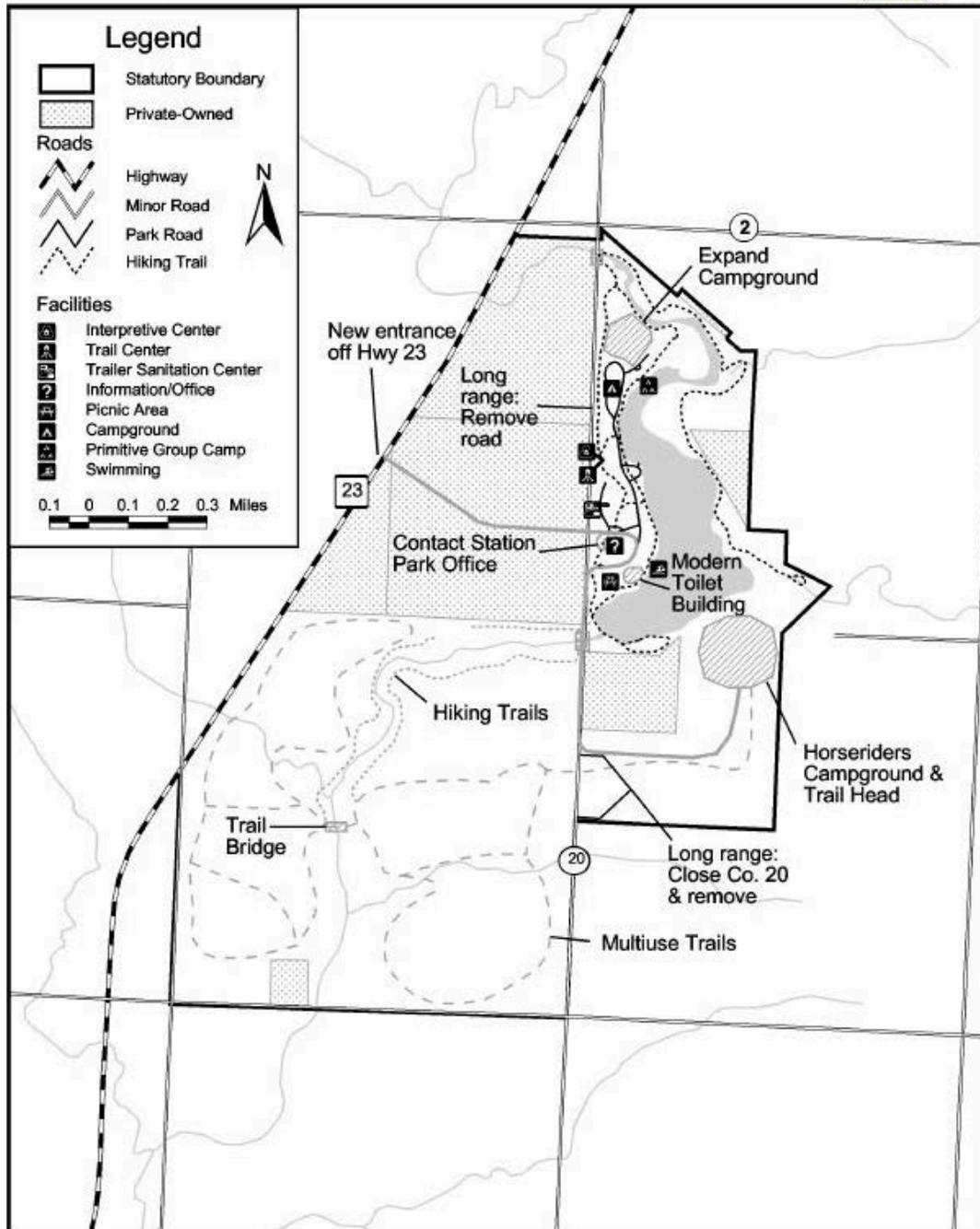
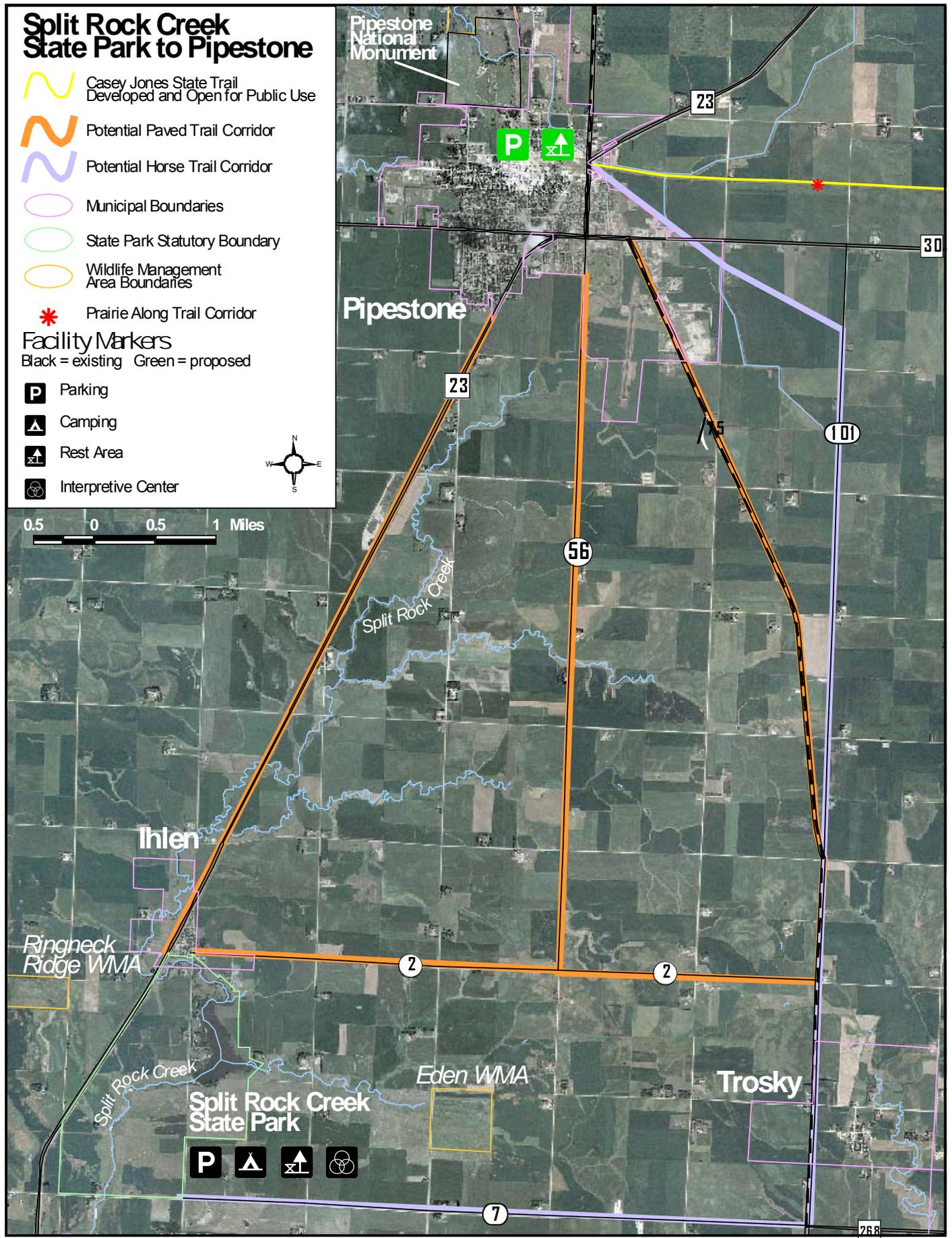


Figure 2: Proposed Development, Park Management Plan

Figure 3: Casey Jones State Trail Master Plan Map



The 2009 legislative session authorized the extension of the Casey Jones State Trail south from Split Rock Creek to Luverne.

Other actions that implement the management plan recommendations have occurred or are underway. Prairie reconstruction has been initiated in many areas. In June 2011, two multi-use trail loops were laid out based on the management plan's suggested routes. The proposed trails were placed to avoid direct impacts to remnant prairie, wetland communities and rock outcroppings in the park. While these trails are multi-use, it is anticipated that horse riders will be significant users.

## PLANNING ISSUES AND PROPOSED CHANGES

### *New horse camp location*

Since the park management plan was approved, the park's statutory boundaries have been expanded and various private properties have been acquired. One of these is a former farm residence site west of Split Rock Creek that appears to offer several advantages for use as a horse campground when compared to the location identified in the plan, south of Split Rock Lake.

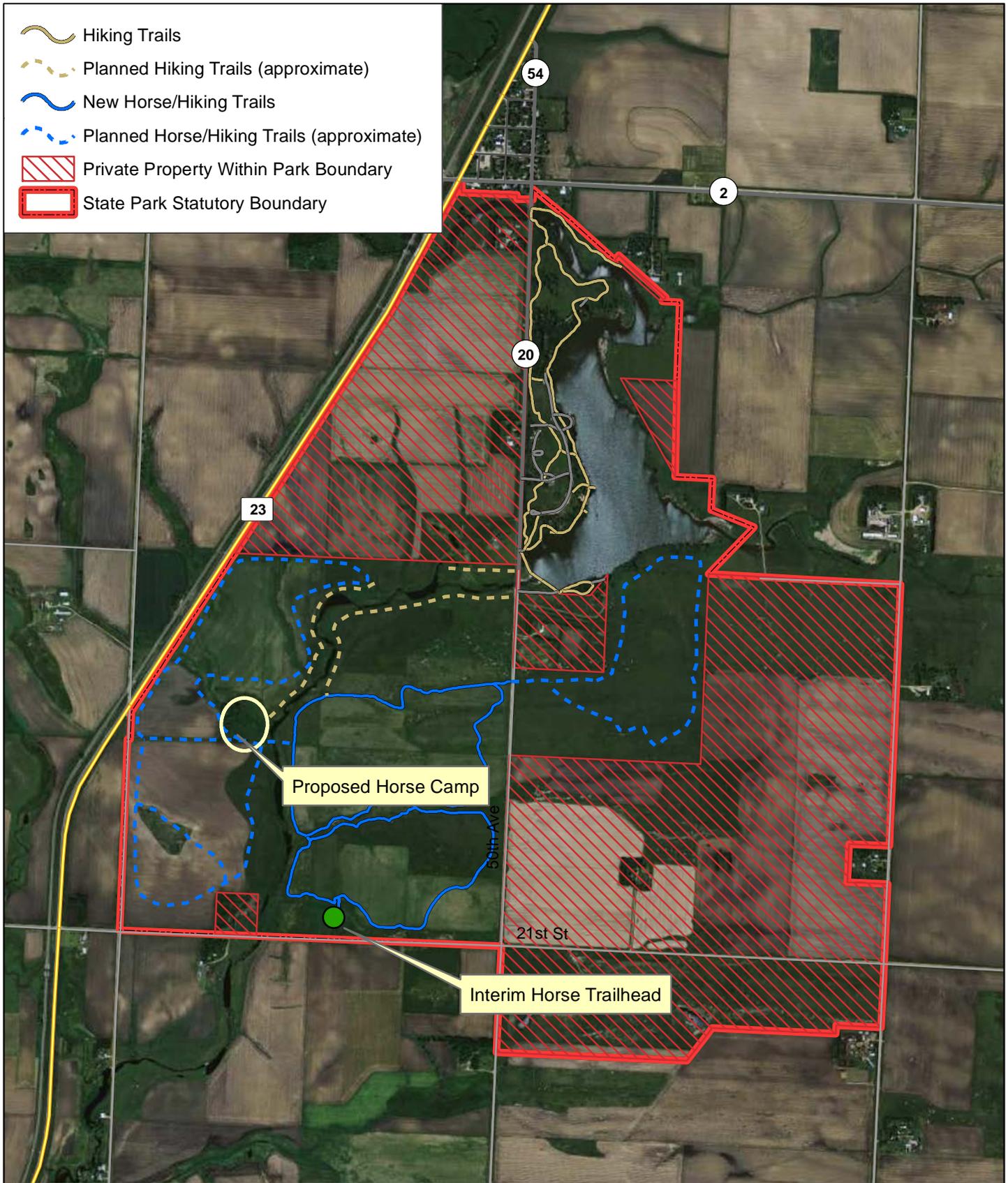
- The new site has an existing driveway, which will be usable with some widening and realignment. The originally proposed site would require development of a new access road approximately 1,500 feet in length, which would cross an area with rock outcrops and potential seepages.
- The existing driveway would provide an entrance to the campground from MN Trunk Highway 23, rather than County Road 20, which is proposed to eventually be closed. The main park entrance is also proposed to eventually be relocated to TH 23 about three-quarters of a mile north of the horse campground entrance.
- The new site has more shade than the originally proposed site, which is largely open except for vegetation along the lakeshore. Plantings to create shade here would take several years to reach maturity. The new site includes larger cottonwood and green ash trees, plus silver maple and other species, providing immediate shade.
- The new site has a well, which would be usable with some upgrades. (The originally proposed site also has a wellhead, but it is very close to the lake and downhill from the proposed horse camp location, making it difficult to utilize.)
- It is anticipated that development in this location would result in lesser impacts on natural resources. The original site is in a pasture area that



Views toward Split Rock Creek from proposed horse campground site

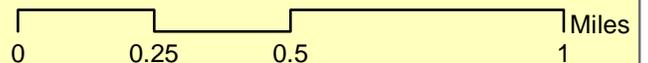


Shade trees on site



**Figure 4: Overview of Proposed Improvements**

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will be reconstructed to prairie, and is also one of the few areas where white-tailed jackrabbits (*lepus townsendii*) are frequently seen. The pasture site also contains quartzite outcroppings that are home to rare ephemeral pool plants. The new site is already “disturbed” by previous development. If not redeveloped as a campground, it would also be reconstructed as prairie.

- The original site offers views of the lake, while the new site offers sweeping views of the Split Rock Creek valley. While both are attractive, the “creek” location offers an advantage for the trail riders’ experience, in that the lake would become the destination, rather than the starting point. A small rest area could be developed overlooking the lake as an amenity for the trail riders.

Based on these factors, this amendment identifies the new site as the preferred horse camp area, and changes the status of the original site to prairie reconstruction, with hiking and horse trail development. Related changes to the management plan are discussed under “Management Plan Revisions.”

*Day use parking area and interim trailhead; lakeside rest area*

The management plan identifies other improvements related to horseback riding in the park, including a trail bridge across Split Rock Creek. The plan also calls for development of a horse rider trailhead, or day use area (see Action #25 above). The location identified for this area was also in the area south of Split Rock Creek Lake, close to, but separated from the horse campground.

The day use parking and trailhead area will now be located adjacent to the new horse campground location. However, because the infrastructure to support the campground and day use area will take several years to initiate, an interim day use location has been identified.

The proposed interim day use site would be located adjacent to Township Road 7 (21<sup>st</sup> Street) about one-quarter mile west of the intersection with County Road 20. The site is part of a former farmstead, and is surrounded by former cropland now reconstructed as prairie. It has a usable driveway and a grassed area adequate for parking several horse trailers.

As an interim site, facilities will be limited, consisting of a manure storage bunker and orientation signs. Trail users must bring their own water. A portable toilet may be installed if warranted by levels of use. Signs will be installed cautioning users to stay on trails and avoid watering horses in the creek in order to protect the Topeka shiner, a federally-endangered species.



Interim trailhead and day use site



New horse trail



Manure bunker, Sand Dunes State Forest

A self-registration station is planned to be installed in 2012 at the temporary trailhead.

The permanent day use area to be located at the new horse camp will include a manure bunker, a water valve or tank, a hitching rail and a vault toilet. A kiosk or panel sign should be provided for rider information and orientation.

Figure 4 shows the proposed locations of the horse campground and day use area, along with the developed and planned horse/hiking trails.

## **NATURAL RESOURCES IMPACT**

Figure 5, Current Land Cover, shows the extent of reconstructed prairie on the west side of the park, in areas that were previously cropland or pasture.

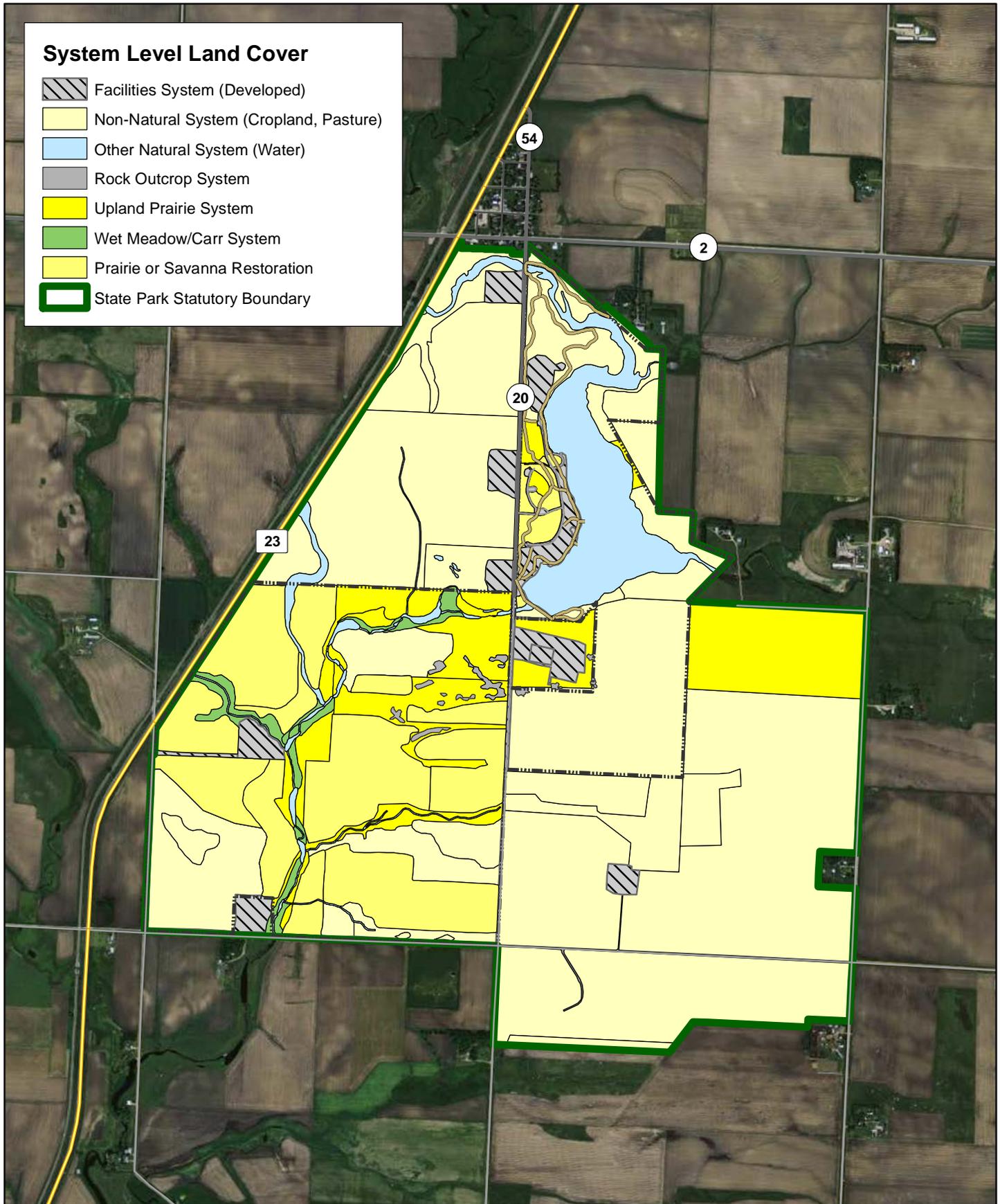
Several endangered, threatened, and special concern species have been reported in or near the park. Split Rock Creek below the dam provides habitat for the federally endangered Topeka shiner. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service holds an easement on either side of Split Rock Creek between the park's southern boundary and the proposed horse camp site in order to protect this habitat. The remnant and reconstructed prairies in the park provide habitat for species such as the regal fritillary, one of temperate North America's most striking butterflies and a special concern species in Minnesota. Quartzite outcroppings provide habitat for concentrations of rare plant species within the ephemeral pools that form on them.

The proposed horse camp/day use area is a previously disturbed site (a former farmstead) and is located outside of the USFWS easement area. The site's resources will be assessed in greater detail prior to development.

The interim day use area is also a previously disturbed former farmstead. Development of the site will remain minimal, but will likely continue for two or three years.

An initial resource assessment of the new trails and the interim day use area was completed in January 2012. Findings are as follows:

- Horse trails, while addressed in the current park plan, are a new recreational activity for the park and impacts will need to be monitored. Placing trails, even mowed trails, through the park's large block of contiguous, largely reconstructed, native grassland will fragment it.
- This phase of development does not impact the Topeka shiner's habitat but trails in the creek's floodplain or crossing it have that potential. The new trail crosses a minor drainageway in two places along the route. These drainageway crossings will need to be monitored for erosion and

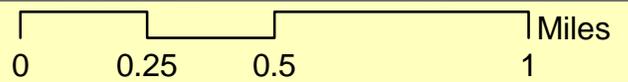


**System Level Land Cover**

-  Facilities System (Developed)
-  Non-Natural System (Cropland, Pasture)
-  Other Natural System (Water)
-  Rock Outcrop System
-  Upland Prairie System
-  Wet Meadow/Carr System
-  Prairie or Savanna Restoration
-  State Park Statutory Boundary

**Figure 5: Current Land Cover**

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compaction impacts as the trails are used and measures to harden or relocate the crossings may need to be implemented if they prove problematic.

- Compaction and erosion issues could be magnified under wet conditions so that trails would need to be temporarily closed.
- The interim day use area will have acceptable resource impacts, if several requirements are met:
  - Signs will be placed at the trailhead indicating that users need to stay on the mowed trails, the reasons why, and where water can be accessed.
  - A horse manure storage bunker should be placed at the temporary trailhead.
  - The site will be monitored for unplanned trails resulting from horses going to the creek for water. DNR park and regional managers will coordinate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the integrity of the USFWS easement.
- Additionally, trails should avoid quartzite outcroppings, and ephemeral pool areas should be monitored to determine any effects that trails are having on the rare species present in the pools.
- Note that “planned trails” shown on the maps in this amendment are approximate in location. Actual locations will be determined based on more detailed on-site resource assessments.

Introduction of invasive species is a concern with introduction of new trails and horse facilities. Trails will be monitored for invasives and treated as needed. Manure in storage bunkers will be handled appropriately to avoid spreading invasives, consistent with Operational Order 113 and the related state park guidelines, which call for designated areas for storage of horse feed, bedding and manure, and disposal of materials off-site. Signs will advise riders to remain on trails and to avoid leaving hay or other feed on site. Educational information on how to prevent spread of invasives can also be supplied at the trailhead.

## **CULTURAL RESOURCES IMPACT**

According to the management plan,

There are three structures that are historically significant in the park, Split Rock Creek Dam, the stone water tower and the County Road 20 Stone Arch Bridge. The Stone Arch Bridge is on the county right-of-way and under county jurisdiction, but is surrounded by the park. Evidence of prehistoric use in the park has been identified in the open field north of the picnic ground. The site may have extended further east, but that area was scraped to gather soil to grade the beach parking lot many years ago. It is likely that other prehistoric sites will be identified in the future on rises overlooking Split Rock Creek.



The proposed location for the horse camp/day use area is a previously disturbed site, with no known cultural resources. The surrounding reconstructed prairies have been disturbed by years of plowing. However, archaeological debris has been found on rises overlooking creek beds in the Rock River drainage area near the park. All proposed development sites will be field checked for the presence of prehistoric and historic artifacts before any work is done.

## **RECREATION AND VISITOR USE IMPACT**

Addition of horse trails and facilities will attract new visitors to the park, thereby increasing its visibility within the region. Increased visitor use can build support for other programs at the park. However, it is important to recognize that the park will include at a maximum between 8 and 9 miles of horse trail. As noted in the management plan, this mileage is not sufficient for a day-long horse ride experience. To make the proposed investment in a horse camp effective, trails must be extended to adjacent county or township roads, especially the planned Casey Jones State Trail. To achieve this goal, trail riders and saddle clubs from the region will need to work with county and township governments and Parks and Trails Division staff.

Other park visitors using the swimming area, fishing pier, picnic areas, hiking trails and historic sites in the park should experience few if any changes as a result of the addition of horse trails and facilities, since these will primarily be located in the previously undeveloped southwest portion of the park.

## **MANAGEMENT PLAN TEXT REVISIONS**

This amendment will replace or supplement those sections of the 2003 management plan that pertain to horse trails and the horse campground, specifically those that are excerpted on pages 1-2 of this document. Figure 4, Proposed Improvements, supplements the "Proposed Visitor Facilities Map" (Figure 12) in the management plan. Figure 5, Current Land Cover, also supplements the management plan with updated information that shows the results of prairie reconstruction and other changes in land use.

## **PUBLIC REVIEW**

A draft of this amendment was released for public review in January 2012. The amendment was posted on the DNR website and copies were available for review at the park. An open house was held at the park on February 16, 2012. Attendees were generally quite supportive of the horse trails, horse camp and day use areas. Park staff was able to give out much information about trails and

resource concerns, and a local riding group volunteered to assist with trail development and additional facilities at the day use area.

Comments included the following:

- Owners of a private parcel in the southwest corner of the park requested a buffer between their property boundary and the nearest horse trail.
- It was suggested that since the lake will be the destination for many trail rides, a small rest area near the lake would be desirable. It could include a few picnic tables, a horse tie off and possibly a portable toilet
- Attendees agreed that the horse campground would be a desirable amenity, but that trail mileage of just 8-9 miles within the park is unlikely to attract visitors from outside the region. The extension of the Casey Jones State Trail could provide additional mileage that would warrant campground development.
- The lack of water in the interim day use area is of no concern, since horses do not need water for short rides or riders bring water with them.
- They view the limited trail system as a place best utilized during one- two hour rides in the evenings or to get kids out on horseback.