

**SUBJECT:** Feasibility Study, Master Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Glacial Heritage Area

**FOR:** OCTOBER BOARD MEETING

**TO BE PRESENTED BY:** Steve Miller, Tom Hauge, Dan Schuller

**SUMMARY:**

The Feasibility Study, Master Plan, and Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Glacial Heritage Area (GHA) have been completed. The Department concludes that the proposed GHA project is feasible from the standpoint of legal authority, recreational and ecological soundness, public support, and availability of funding. In preparing the EIS for the proposed GHA project, the DNR has complied with the requirements of WEPA, s. 1.11, Stats. and Ch. NR 150, Wis. Adm. Code.

Working with a group of local leaders over the past four years, the Department has developed a proposal for a network of recreation and conservation lands centered primarily in western Jefferson County.

To summarize, the GHA project would:

- Expand 5 existing parks and establish 7 new parks.
- Establish 100 miles of trails linking parks and cities and villages.
- Protect pockets of land along major rivers and streams for canoe access and to protect important riparian habitat areas.
- Expand 11 State Wildlife Areas and buffer them with Rural Landscape Protection Areas.
- Establish the Crawfish Prairie Habitat Area.

The GHA project would be a unique partnership among the Department, county park departments (most notably the Jefferson County Park Department), municipalities, conservation groups, non-profit groups, business interests, and others.

The GHA plan can be viewed at <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/facilities/glacial/documents.html>.

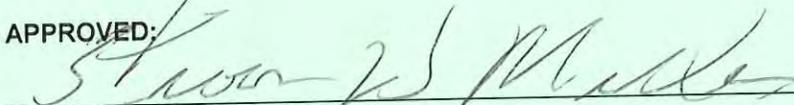
**RECOMMENDATION:** The Department recommends that the Natural Resources Board approve the feasibility study and master plan for the Glacial Heritage Area.

**LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS:**

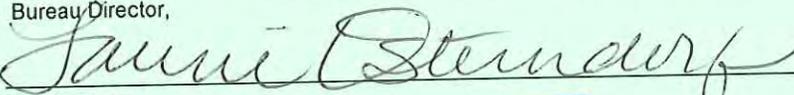
- No  Fiscal Estimate Required
- No  Environmental Assessment or Impact Statement Required
- No  Background Memo

- Yes  Attached
- Yes  Attached
- Yes  Attached

**APPROVED:**

  
Bureau Director,

9-21-09  
Date

  
Administrator,

9/21/09  
Date

  
Secretary, Matt Frank

10-6-09  
Date

cc: Laurie J. Ross - AD/8

## CORRESPONDENCE/MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 21, 2009

TO: Natural Resources Board members

FROM: Matthew Frank - Secretary 

SUBJECT: Feasibility Study, Master Plan, and Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Glacial Heritage Area

I recommend that the Natural Resources Board approve the establishment of the Glacial Heritage Area (GHA). The Department recently completed the attached feasibility study, master plan, and environmental impact statement for the proposed project. The Department concludes that the proposed GHA project is feasible from the standpoint of legal authority, recreational and ecological soundness, public support, and availability of funding. Indeed, the public response during the public input process indicated a strong level of support for the project as a whole.

The proposed GHA project would be a network of parks, preserves, wildlife & natural areas linked together and to nearby cities and villages with different types of trails. The network would offer a range of hiking, biking, horseback riding, paddling, hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife watching, camping, and cross-country skiing experiences. Importantly, the GHA network would not provide for this broad range of outdoor activities at every place within the network. Rather, it would provide different outdoor opportunities at places best suited to provide high quality experiences. The intent is that the proposed network collectively meets the needs of a broad range of outdoor enthusiasts. With over 50% of the state's population within an hour drive of the proposed network, the project seeks to address the growing demand for outdoor recreation opportunities in close proximity to where people live.

Some of the components of the GHA network exist, some are proposed to be expanded, and some are proposed to be created. The project would be a collaborative effort of many partners, most notably Jefferson County and the Department, and is strongly supported by the public, local units of government, local business leaders, conservation and recreation groups, and other organizations. In summary, the existing lands owned or authorized for purchase and the proposed future acquisition roles are as follows:

Category	Currently owned or authorized (acres)	Proposed (acres)		
		DNR-led acquisition	Partner-led acquisition	Total acquisition
Wildlife & Natural Areas	31,500	20,800	0	20,800
Conservation Parks	3,500	2,900	901	3,801
Linking Trails	300	330	1,014	1,344
River-based Conservation Areas	400	1,750	325	2,075
<b>Total</b>	<b>35,700</b>	<b>25,780</b>	<b>2,240</b>	<b>28,020</b>

## **I. Summary of the proposed project.**

An overview of the project is provided in the attached brochure. The proposed GHA network includes four major components:

### Wildlife & Natural Areas

Eleven State Wildlife Areas and the Red Cedar Lake State Natural Area are present within the GHA Study Area and together encompass over 25,000 acres. The GHA plan would expand the eleven State Wildlife Areas to protect and restore additional native habitats, provide better public access and more recognizable boundaries, increase public hunting and trapping opportunities, and provide additional opportunities for rustic outdoor recreation. Most of the proposed expansions of the Wildlife Areas would shift the existing project boundaries out to the nearest roadway. The plan also would establish one new property – the Crawfish Prairie Habitat Area – which would provide critically needed habitat for grassland birds and other species. In addition, the plan would buffer many of the Wildlife Areas with farming dominated areas, referred to as Rural Landscape Protection Areas. Finally, the plan proposes to expand the Red Cedar Lake State Natural Area.

### Conservation Parks

The primary purpose of the conservation parks is to provide high-quality opportunities for residents and visitors to engage in a range of outdoor activities. In particular, the parks are intended to offer hiking, biking, mountain biking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing trails and associated facilities such as picnic areas and places to watch wildlife. A total of ten parks and preserves currently exist in the area. The GHA plan would expand five of these and establish seven new parks to provide a broader range of outdoor experiences. Most of the conservation parks are proposed to eventually range in size from 200 to 700 acres.

### Linking Trails

Approximately 100 miles of linking trails are proposed to meander through the countryside and connect the conservation areas to the nearby cities and villages. The linking trails would offer longer distance biking, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing opportunities on relatively flat lands, either off-road or separated from vehicle traffic, and suitable for people with a range of abilities, including children and seniors. Most trails would be within narrow corridors (typically 30' to 100') with surfaces of packed gravel, asphalt, or grass. Some would have different "treads" for different trail users (for example, one path for bicycles, and an adjacent one for horses).

### River-based Conservation Areas

Two types of lands along rivers and creeks would be part of the GHA. First, is a set of small access sites (5 to 10 acres), and potentially one or two larger sites, that would provide access for boaters, paddlers, and shore anglers. These areas might include parking, boat launches, picnic areas, pit toilets, and other simple facilities. The larger sites could provide rustic campsites accessible only from the water.

The second component would focus on natural resource protection: high quality wetlands and floodplain forests along the Bark River, Koshkonong Creek, and Allen Creek. These areas harbor diverse native communities and populations of several rare plant and animal species. In addition, the plan proposes protecting permanent riparian habitat along the Rock, Crawfish, Bark, and Maunsha Rivers and Koshkonong, Whitewater, and Allen Creeks and their major tributaries to help improve water quality by filtering out nutrients and sediments, restore riparian habitat including wetlands, and create wildlife travel corridors

The GHA project is unique in many ways. Some of the highlights are:

- **Community-based.** More than any project in recent memory, the GHA is a project designed to meet state significant recreation needs and yet is very much a project grounded in local perspectives, desires, and vision. Throughout the planning process, a diversity of elected officials and community leaders have helped guide the project and provided invaluable ideas and perspectives. As a result, the Department has been able to evaluate its traditional approach to land protection and recreation development through a much broader lens, including issues such as local economic development, community growth patterns, and health benefits of providing readily accessible opportunities for residents and visitors to get outdoors. Local residents and leaders have a strong sense of ownership in the project. The project and the planning process have the potential to be a model for future Department projects. A complete list of the External Advisory Team is found in Appendix A of the plan.
- **Partnerships.** The GHA seeks to combine the unique strengths of different partners to develop a network of recreation and conservation lands that is “greater than the sum of its parts.” One of the most notable manifestations of this partnership approach is that some of the lands in the network are proposed to be acquired and managed by the Department, some by the partners, and some would be acquired by the Department and managed and operated by a partner. The primary partner to manage these properties is proposed to be the Jefferson County Parks Department. However, it is possible that other partners may also wish to take on a range of roles in managing and operating properties in the future.
- **A network, not a place.** The proposed Glacial Heritage Area project would be a coordinated series of parks, preserves, wildlife and natural areas, and other conservation lands that are linked together and to nearby cities and villages with different types of trails. This network of “strings and pearls” is intended to provide readily accessible opportunities for residents and visitors to get outdoors to hike, bike, watch wildlife, fish, paddle, hunt, trap, camp, cross country ski, ride horses, and participate in other nature-based activities. Equally important, the project also seeks to protect and restore native grassland, savanna, woodland, and wetland habitats, and improve water quality in lakes, wetlands, and rivers. As a consequence, Department staff from a wide range of programs have been involved in the planning process and would also be involved in implementation.

## II. Issues raised during the public review period.

The draft plan was released for public review on June 1, 2009. Three open house meetings and a formal public hearing were held a month later with the comment period running until July 15<sup>th</sup>. The Department summarized the input received and provided responses to concerns raised in the document *Summary of public input to the Environmental Impact Statement, Draft Feasibility Study, and Draft Master Plan for the proposed Glacial Heritage Area* (attached). The Department also prepared two Frequently Asked Questions regarding property taxes, project boundaries and land acquisition (attached).

The project received overwhelming support from individuals and organizations. Over 90% of people responding to the survey instrument developed for the project “strongly supported” or “moderately supported” all aspects of the proposed network. All the letters or resolutions received from groups and organizations strongly supported the project as proposed. The survey is attached.

Two issues raised during the review period merit further discussion – providing additional equestrian opportunities in the project and incorporating hunting and trapping in the proposed new conservation parks. The *Summary* document goes into detail about these issues; they are described here.

### Horseback Riding.

The draft GHA plan called for the potential establishment of equestrian trails at the four largest of the proposed new parks (depending on the characteristics of the land acquired) and for many of the linking trails to incorporate horseback riding. The Department received requests to incorporate additional equestrian trails into different components of the proposed network, primarily the conservation parks, linking trails, and wildlife areas. Based on the input received, the Department has made two changes to the plan to provide the opportunity to create additional equestrian trails that are part of larger regional networks.

The Department is sensitive to the demand for horseback riding in the area and hopes that the GHA project can make a significant contribution to helping meet the demand that exists throughout southern Wisconsin. With these changes and clarifications, for the current time the Department prefers to implement the GHA proposal before making additional changes.

### Hunting and Trapping.

The largest component of the proposed network would be the expansion of the eleven State Wildlife Areas and the establishment of new wildlife properties in the GHA, currently consisting of 31,500 owned or authorized acres. The plan proposes an addition of 20,800 acres for wildlife habitat. When the plan is fully implemented, the GHA project will encompass over 52,000 acres of hunting and trapping opportunities, more than all the land within the Northern and southern Units of the Kettle Moraine State Forests combined. Proposed land acquisition to expand and create Wildlife Areas comprises almost 75% of all the land proposed to be acquired in the GHA plan. In addition, most of the river-based conservation areas would be open to hunting and trapping and lands within the new conservation parks would be open to hunting that supplements but does not conflict with the parks' primary purposes and uses.

Based on the input received, clarifying language was added to the plan regarding the hunting seasons that the Department expects would be incorporated into areas of the new parks where hunting would supplement but not conflict with these properties' primary uses. The Department believes that this approach best meets the primary purpose of the parks and also provides a high quality experience for hunters. If the GHA project is approved by the Natural Resources Board, the Department would pursue a change to Administrative Code in 2010 to authorize deer and turkey hunting on lands the Department acquires within the seven new conservation parks as described in the implementation plans. The Department plans to use the Spring Hearing process to implement these rule changes.

By law, trapping is not allowed on lands acquired under state park authority. Much of the trapping that occurs in the study area is for wetland-associated species, in particular muskrats, using wet sets or under ice traps. Because of the existing public access to Hope Lake through an outlet stream, the lake bed of this proposed park is not part of the proposed park boundary. This will allow existing public trapping and hunting to continue in the lake.

Based on public input, the Department evaluated both acquiring lands for the seven new conservation parks under its recreation area authority and designating all the lands that the Department purchases within the GHA project as state recreation areas. The Department evaluated this option and concluded that the GHA project is best served by clearly designating each of the different components in the network according to their primary purpose and use.

### **III. Implementation issues.**

Given the proposed project's scale, scope, and complexity, implementation will require the efforts of a broad range of partners as well as a flexible approach. Although residents and visitors may see many pieces of the network develop in the short-term, it will likely take decades to achieve the vision proposed.

One component of implementation merits highlighting – lands that the Department would purchase for the parks, linking trails, and river access sites that Jefferson County Parks Department would manage and operate. The Department proposes to enter into agreements regarding management of these properties in a stepwise process as follows. First, the Department proposes to enter into an overarching memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Jefferson County. This MOU would describe the goals and objectives of the partnership, respective general roles, how the hunting rules applicable to the conservation parks will be incorporated, a process for resolving problems, and other issues as needed. The MOU would be signed by the Department Secretary and the Jefferson County Board.

Second, when the Department acquires land for the new conservation parks, linking trails or river access sites, then an "implementation plan" would be developed for the property. The implementation plan would describe in more detail and map the specific natural and cultural resources, existing land cover and vegetation characteristics, and other unique features present on the land acquired. The implementation plan will also describe what recreation activities would occur in which parts of the property, what facilities would be developed, what habitats would be managed and restored, and what land management techniques would be used.

As additional land holdings are acquired and a broader range of activities is possible at a park or river site, then the implementation plan would need to be amended to describe additional facility developments, designated use areas, and management activities. Implementation plans for the linking trails would be developed as complete or meaningful segments between destination points are acquired by either the Department or partners.

It is the Department's intent that future users of the property help design the implementation plan. The Department will assist the County in ensuring that public involvement in the planning process that is commensurate with the complexity of the planned uses for the subject property occurs. All implementation plans and amendments would need to be approved by the Department Secretary and the Jefferson County Parks Committee prior to any facility development or management actions on Department-owned property.

Third, following completion and approval of an implementation plan, the Department proposes to enter into a 15-year land use agreement with Jefferson County for the subject property. This agreement would describe the different specific roles that each party has in terms of carrying out the implementation plan (e.g., construction of trails, parking lots, picnic facilities, boat access sites, and habitat management actions), responsibility for enforcement actions, how revenues from sharecropping or timber harvest will be distributed, and other issues as necessary.

### **IV. EIS conclusions.**

An Environmental Impact Statement has been completed and the project has been certified as compliant with the Wisconsin Environmental Policy Act (WEPA). No significant adverse impacts to the environment are expected. The project is intended and designed to provide significant benefits to the area's environment and resources.