Acknowledgments

In mid-2005, Beltrami County established a Recreational Trails Advisory Task Force to oversee the comprehensive planning of trails on county lands. This document is the final product of the process, which was completed and adopted by the County Board in April of 2006.

Public Involvement

Given the considerable public interest in trails, the Beltrami County Board placed high value on extensive user group and citizen involvement in the project. Through formal interviews, informal meetings, and open houses, individual citizens and advocacy groups had direct access to the consultant team and Task Force on numerous occasions. The comments and suggestions received from these interactions proved very fruitful and greatly influenced the development of the trail system plan.

The consultant team would like to thank Beltrami County for undertaking an open and constructive public participation process for this project. This approach allowed many perspectives to be considered and acted upon. Through this process, a responsible balance between individual interests and the general public good was achieved.

The consultant team would also like to thank the Task Force for their participation. Their individual and collective insights were instrumental in drawing conclusions that were reasonable, and responsible. The County Board should also be commended for their faith in the public process and confidence that citizens can help find balanced solutions if given the right opportunity and planning process. As co-chairs of the Task Force, Ron Otterstad and Joe Vene are commended for their guidance on planning issues and understanding of the regional context.

The consultant team also extends a heartfelt thank you to the Beltrami County staff, who spend many hours discussing issues and touring the county to review potential trail development areas. Staff’s understanding of the larger county context and how trails fit into the Forest Management Plan was also of high value as conclusions were drawn.

Finally, the consultant team extends a thank you to the citizens who took the time to attend meetings, write letters, and make phone calls so that we could understand their issues firsthand and find solutions that seemed reasonable and workable.

Sincerely,

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SECTION 1

BACKGROUND AND PLANNING CONTEXT

COUNTY LANDS MANAGED FOR MANY USES

Beltrami County owns and manages approximately 147,000 acres of tax-forfeited land within the county. The Beltrami County Board maintains a strong commitment to responsible multiple use of these lands to serve many interests. With timber harvesting, for example, revenues are generated that cover the cost of the many services the county offers to its citizens. Harvesting and other tools are also used to manage the health, biological diversity, and habitat value of the forest.

With recreation, county lands provide citizens and tourists an opportunity to pursue a variety of motorized and non-motorized recreational activities. As with managing natural resources, the County strives to find the right balance between providing access to public lands for recreation while at the same time preserving and protecting the resource. This plan is a key part of that effort and helps position the County to successfully manage ever-increasing recreational demands on its public lands.

RECREATION RELATIVE TO RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

As noted above, resource management is vital to maintaining a healthy forest and is the County’s primary goal. Through active management, the County will ensure that the resource will remain healthy and available for multiple uses for generations to come.

The use of a variety of timber harvesting treatments are the main methods of managing the forest. Timber harvesting is also economically important and remains a major revenue source for the County. For example, revenues were $968,000 in 2000; $1,067,000 in 2001; $1,111,000 in 2002; $1,633,000 in 2003; and $2,000,000 in 2004. Although yearly revenues fluctuate over time, timber harvesting is expected to remain an important revenue source for the foreseeable future and vital to supporting a variety of public goods performed by the County.

For these reasons, recreational trails will have to be developed consistent with, and often times in response to, broader forest management plans and policies so that their impacts are not detrimental to the resource. At times, this may require realignment of trails or restrictions on recreational uses in certain parts of the forest or during various seasons in order to achieve broader resource management goals.

AN EVOLVING REGIONAL ECONOMY

In the past decade or more, the regional economy has been going through significant change, with a number of economic factors affecting traditional industries. In response, the region has been actively fostering new forms of economic development to augment traditional industries and economies. Expansion of the tourist industry, small and technology-based businesses, health care facilities, and educational institutions are all considered vital to building a more diverse regional economy.
Recreational use of county lands has a long history that is deeply rooted in the local culture. Traditionally, trails developed for resource management and timber harvesting were informally and routinely used for recreation. This use centered on individual activities, such as hunting, hiking, camping, wildlife viewing, and resource harvesting (berries, mushrooms, wild rice, etc.).

In the last decade or so, recreational use of county lands has grown, with both motorized and non-motorized trail users seeing increases in use levels on the forest access routes and trails with which they are most familiar. As Beltrami County and the greater Bemidji area grows as a year-round regional center and tourist destination, a growing and more diverse population base will put increasing pressure on the public and private land resources.

In some cases, such as cross-country skiing, a steadfast group of enthusiasts has increased the demand over time for higher quality trails. The local advocacy group has favorably responded to this by developing a well-respected system of trails in the Bemidji area that draws skiers from within and outside of the region. On county-owned land, the Movil Maze and Three Island Park are well known for their high quality skiing.

Likewise, the growth of motorized uses such as ATVs is putting new pressures on the land resource that raises understandable concerns about managing use. As with cross-country skiers, there is a desire by OHV advocates to work with the County on providing for this use in a responsible and sustainable way. The same holds true for virtually all other forms of recreational trail uses that occur within the county.

Through the preparation of this plan, the County Board has taken a major step in addressing the growing need to accommodate recreational uses in a more managed and thoughtful manner in order to maintain access while protecting the resource.

The Role of User Groups in Recreational Use of County Land

As defined in Section 2, each of the user groups recognize that use of county lands for recreation is a privilege and that maintaining access to the forest is a shared responsibility. The success of this plan relies heavily on this precept and on the willingness of each group to share the forest and actively participate in plan implementation and the responsible use of trails.
RECREATIONAL USES OF PUBLIC LANDS ON A BROADER SCALE

As with county lands, recreational use of state and federal lands also has a long history. Whereas Beltrami County is undertaking this planning initiative to address and accommodate recreational uses on county land, this is clearly a much broader issue that also affects forest lands managed by MN DNR and USFS. Although each agency may take different approaches to address the issue, accommodating recreational uses is a shared responsibility requiring close collaboration between public land managers to ensure that all needs are adequately met and, as importantly, well managed.

Under this plan, Beltrami County is setting forth its approach to addressing recreational trail needs and is shouldering as much of the responsibility as is reasonable on county lands. It is assumed that the recreational trail use plans developed by MN DNR and USFS will also seek this end, whereby the collective recreational need of the region will be met and the land resource adequately protected.

RECREATIONAL TRAIL USES AS PART OF THE BROADER FOREST MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Beltrami County Forest Management Plan covers all aspects of managing the forest for multiple uses. With the growth of recreational use of county lands, the County is expanding the plan beyond its traditional natural resources management focus to include recreational components. Ultimately, the plan is expected to consist of several parts, as the following graphic illustrates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPONENTS OF THE FOREST MANAGEMENT PLAN</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Forest Management Plan</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Overarching plan defining vision and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Forest management and certification</td>
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<td>- General forest uses and access, including “forest access routes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recreational Trails Plan</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Classification, development, and operation of designated trails</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parks and Recreation Areas Plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Classification, development, and operation of designated parks and recreation areas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following provides a brief overview of each component of the Forest Management Plan and how recreational trail uses will be addressed under each plan.

FOREST MANAGEMENT PLAN

This plan focuses on the management of the forest and land resources associated with County land holdings. The plan is centered around the principles of a sustainable harvest and preservation of the forest aesthetic, wildlife values, riparian areas, cultural resources, soils, and water quality. In addition to timber stumpage management, the plan also addresses fuelwood/salvage sales, gravel extraction, Balsam bough harvesting, and agricultural leases.
As identified in the last graphic, “Forest Access Routes” are technically covered under the overall Forest Management Plan. Forest access route is a generic term used to describe a corridor or treadway through the forest that allows machinery, vehicles, or people to traverse a property. Typically, access routes are recognized as abandoned roads or old logging trails through the forest.

**Distinction Between Forest Access Routes and Designated Trails**

The distinction between forest access routes relative to designated recreational trails is that the former are not managed or maintained for any specific type of recreational use. As informal corridors, individual forest access routes are not typically included as part of a designated recreational trail system. Instead, these routes are defined as part of the broader forest management plan to ensure that their use is consistent with other forest management activities and uses as previously identified. This includes determining which areas of the forest are suitable for any particular recreational or other use, taking into consideration resource management plans and environmental protection strategies associated with a given forest.

**Resource Management Remains a Priority**

It is important to recognize that multiple use of forest land requires the setting of priorities. Realistically, forest management will remain a top priority and important to sustaining the forest. As the forest is managed and timber harvested, existing forest access routes may on occasion have to be realigned to accommodate this activity, including those that are commonly used for informal recreational activities. In these instances, user groups will have to work with County resource managers to determine how routes should be altered to accommodate each others needs, with the intent being to end up with alignments that accommodate both timber harvesting and recreational use whenever feasible.

**Recreational Trails Plan**

This plan focuses on the development of a system of designated trails on county lands for specific types of recreational uses. The plan includes designated trails for cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, off-highway vehicles, hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, dog sledding, and canoeing. As designated trails, the level of design, management, and maintenance is higher than is the case with forest access routes.

**Parks and Recreation Areas Plan**

At some point in time, the growth in demand for recreational pursuits other than trails will likely warrant the preparation of a separate plan for parks and recreation areas to complement the trails plan. This type of plan would focus on defining classifications for a variety of parks and recreation areas as needed to accommodate specific types of recreational uses, such as picnic areas, camping facilities, boat/canoe launches, archery ranges, fishing docks, multiuse areas, beach facilities, and any number of other possible amenities. Designated trails would also be provided in these areas.

_End of section._
SECTION 2  TRENDS AND PUBLIC PROCESS FINDINGS

OVERVIEW

As the first formal planning process for recreational trails, the Beltrami County Board and Trails Task Force placed considerable emphasis on stakeholder input to ensure that all interests, ideas, and concerns were identified and given due consideration. This section summarizes the findings from the public process.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

Stakeholders were defined as any individual or group that had an interest in the recreational use of county-owned land and/or otherwise wanted to provide input into the planning process. Under the direction of the Trails Task Force, a series of meetings were held with local trail advocates and other special interest groups to define issues and understand their perspectives on trail-related issues. A number of public open houses were also held to ensure that all interested individuals and groups had an opportunity to participate.

Specifically identified trail advocacy groups included those interested in:
  • Off-highway vehicle use
  • Cross-country skiing
  • Hunting and other forms of individual pursuits on public land (i.e., berry picking, mushroom hunting, etc.)
  • Bicycling – mountain and road/paved trail
  • Inline skating
  • Snowmobiling
  • Horsecamping
  • Hiking and walking
  • Dog sledding and skijoring

Other stakeholders included:
  • Interested citizens that informally use trails on public lands for a variety of reasons
  • Local land owners
  • Local Townships
  • Local Audubon Society
  • Local outdoor programs, such as those offered through the BSU Outdoor Program
  • Convention Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, and local resort community
  • Other public agencies (USFS, MN DNR, etc.)
  • Local cities/towns and Indian communities (Leech Lake)

Overall, the stakeholder meetings and open houses provided much needed perspectives on recreational trail use and demand in Beltrami County. Although some groups are more established and thus better represented, there was enough cross-interest between recreational activities that issues associated with under-represented groups were reasonably defined by those attending other meetings. For example, a cross-country skier was often an avid bicyclist, as was a snowmobile rider commonly an ATV rider.
COMMON STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES REGARDING TRAIL NEEDS

Each of the stakeholder groups defined issues, needs, and perspectives unique to their group. In many cases, there were a variety of shared perspectives among most, if not all, groups. The following considers these.

GROWING PRESSURE ON PUBLIC LANDS

The growing pressure of recreational use on public lands is a common perception of all groups, albeit in different ways with differing levels of concern. For example, the OHV advocates recognize that there are more riders using the forest access routes. Notably, the incidence of irresponsible riders causing problems for everyone else is also more common than in the past and they do not want this activity to affect their access to trails.

Likewise, the Audubon Society sees numerous “red flags” with excessive ATV use of the forest access routes, suggesting that a more restrictive approach to management may be necessary. Although the solution to this issue may be viewed differently, there is a common recognition that use levels are growing and a trails plan is needed.

At the same time, most of the groups agree that use pressures are “not over the top” and remain manageable if everyone understands the issues and works together to develop a recreational trails plan that results in reasonable and sustainable shared-use of public lands. The groups also uniformly applaud the County for taking a proactive and collaborative approach to planning where the interests of all stakeholders are duly considered and acted upon.

CHANGING DYNAMIC TO ACCESSING PRIVATE PROPERTY

As the area’s population grows and land values escalate in response to supply and demand, traditional “hand shake” access to private lands for recreational use is becoming less predictable. This is compounded by the fact that large industrial land owners are more often selling off or otherwise restricting public access to their land holdings.

Although the degree to which all of this will ultimately curtail public access to private lands is hard to predict, many of the groups share the concern that this is a very real and growing issue, with the expectation that more restrictive use of private lands is a foregone conclusion. The ramification to this is obvious to these groups: Increased pressure on remaining public lands.

COMMON PERSPECTIVES

Without exception, advocates of motorized and non-motorized recreation share a number of common perspectives:

- Use of public lands is a privilege and that each group has a shared responsibility to preserve that privilege
- Recognition that recreational use of public lands has to be consistent with resource management plans
- General agreement that shared use of public lands has been largely successful and by working together conflicts can be avoided and future success more assured
- Environmental stewardship and sustainable use of public lands is a shared goal, with all groups underscoring that a major reason they recreate on public lands is enjoying the natural setting, being outdoors, and finding solitude
- A willingness by most groups to pay reasonable fees to support the trails they use
COMMON CONCERN ABOUT RECREATIONAL USE OF PUBLIC LAND

Each group recognizes a common and pervasive concern about recreational use of public lands: Individual recklessness or irresponsible users are causing conflicts and environmental impacts that will lead to more restrictions on access. As an OHV advocate put it: “We have a good culture of mutual respect with a few bad apples that want to ruin it for everyone else.” Each of the groups recognizes that it is a shared responsibility to deal with these types of individuals.

Notably, reckless users were not attributed solely to a given type of recreational pursuit. It was more about individuals who are either uneducated about responsible use, are simply being irresponsible, or both. Uniformly, it is believed that these individuals must be held accountable by their peers and the larger recreational community. A formal recreational trails plan coupled with educational material and subsequent enforcement of illegal practices were all considered important to eliminating the majority of these occurrences.

NEED FOR A RECREATION MANAGER AND RECREATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Collectively, stakeholders wondered if the County has reached a threshold where it makes sense to develop a county-wide recreation plan. Adding a recreation manager-type position to the County staff to oversee recreation-related activities, including trails, was also thought to be justifiable given the increases in recreational demands. Under this scenario, planning, development, management, and maintenance of all trails and recreational activities would be better coordinated, professionally managed, and consistent.

Establishing a broader, county-wide Recreation Advisory Committee was also thought to have merit to make sure that all recreational activities across the county were being considered and that all advocacy groups have the same opportunity to be heard. With this type of group in place, it was felt that recommendations that went to the County Board would be well-balanced and represent the interests of all user groups, not just a select few.

Adding a recreation manager would also help various volunteers be more efficient and accomplish more for their groups if their efforts were better coordinated. Current volunteers expect that if their time commitment was reduced due to better coordination, more people would take some time out of their busy days to volunteer on a more routine basis.

A number of stakeholders underscored the difficulty of sustaining their group when having to rely totally on volunteers to develop, manage, and maintain trails. This challenge is becoming harder as more people use the trails but not enough volunteers step forward to help out. In numerous cases, the long-time leaders of these groups are ready to turn over responsibilities to others, but nobody is interested given the time commitment required to do the job.

Note that although hiring a recreation manager and establishing a Recreation Advisory Committee would have significant value, it should be recognized that the County will continue to have limited resources and thus will not be taking over the role and responsibilities of local trail groups. Volunteer and advocacy group efforts will continue to be the backbone behind the implementation of the trails plan.
In addition to common perspectives, each stakeholder had perspectives about their own recreational trail needs, as the following summarizes.

**CROSS-COUNTRY SKI CLUB**

The Ski Club is actively involved in the development and maintenance of the ski trails in the Bemidji area. Approximately 120 households belong to the club, with each household having one or more active skiers. There are also many other skiers that use the trails but do not belong to the club. The following summarizes the key points made during their interview.

**Current Circumstances:**
- A total of six sites are developed for cross-country skiing in the Bemidji area, two of which are on county land, including the Movil Maze and Three Island Park
- The Movil Maze is considered second only to the Montebello Trail in Bemidji in terms of use and general appeal and quality
- Three Island is also a nice setting, but less developed and used than Movil Maze
- The character of the land is what makes both of the county properties very appealing
- Overall, ski trails are considered excellent and highly regarded, with a mixture of easy to challenging trails to suit virtually everyone’s needs, from family to racer
- Grooming is considered excellent

**Opportunities for Improvements:**
- There is a desire by the club to establish two new sites in the county on state land and to expand the Montebello Trail and continue to improve the Movil Maze and Three Island Park sites
- Additional barriers are needed to prevent unauthorized uses on the trails, both in winter and summer seasons
- Signage could be improved, as well as figuring out a way to reduce signs getting shot up with guns
- Improved landscaping in select locations (such as parking lots) to improve aesthetics
- Potentially relocate a few trails that impact wetlands (especially along the river in Three Island Park) or run under coniferous trees, which makes them harder to maintain due to needles dropping

**Building Relationships with Other Trail Users:**
- Using ski trails more extensively for summer hiking and mountain biking was considered very compatible with cross-country skiing (non-motorized seemed more appropriate) and the idea was readily supported by the group
- Concerns with ATVs centered around reckless users causing erosion and rutting on trails and degrading adjoining natural areas, which ruins the trail for other users (the group made a point of stating that responsible users of ATVs were not an issue and that everyone gets along very well most of the time)
- In general, skiers and snowmobilers get along very well, with each respecting the others trails (especially at Three Island Park, where a major snowmobile trail traverses through the property)
- On occasion, a snowmobiler gets on the wrong trail, but this is believed to be most often by accident rather than on purpose
- In winter, ATVs on the trails can be a problem since they tend to rut the trail more than a snowmobile would
Other Comments/Concerns:
• Grant-in-aid dollars are vital to keeping the trails maintained, as are the volunteers
• There is an openness to trail fees to help defer costs – suggesting that trail users are willing to pay if it means high quality trails

SNOWMOBILE RIDERS
Of all the groups, the local snowmobile riders are one of the most organized and successful in securing trail corridors on both public and private lands. The 300 to 400 miles of trails maintained by the North County Snowmobile Club alone covers over 200 sections of land with many private and public owners. In addition, a couple of other clubs contribute to this system, especially to the north. The following summarizes the key points made during their interview.

Current Circumstances:
• Trail corridors are in almost a constant state of flux from year to year due to the ever changing nature of securing corridors through private land
• The group is at the maximum miles of trails it can manage and maintain
• The system is generally well liked and changes enough each year to keep the trails interesting to the user
• Securing rights on private land for trails is becoming more of a challenge, partly due to some ATV riders assuming they can use the snowmobile trails and end up rutting them up

Opportunities for Improvements:
• As trails change, maintaining a balance between straight and curvy trails would add interest, which can be a challenge since many of the corridors that are followed are relatively straight due to previous uses (i.e., rail beds, forest roads, property edges, etc.)
• Continuing to improve mapping and information about trails and local services is needed for local users and visitors to the region

Building Relationships with Other Trail Users:
• In general, snowmobilers and skiers get along very well, with each respecting the others trails, especially at Three Island Park where a major snowmobile trails runs through it
• OHV users, especially trucks, that use snowmobile trail corridors in the summer are rutting some trails and causing problems (gates do not seem to work all of the time)
• The group is open to trails being used for other uses during the summer if those uses do not restrict their use of the trail, which is the biggest concern with paved bike trails due to the stud ban issue (for point of reference, about 50% of snowmobiles have studs)
• Snowmobilers were open to discussing the feasibility of paving the Blue Ox Trail with either aggregate or asphalt as long as it did not interfere with their use of the trail, with studs being the biggest issue to resolve (Note: Some states, like Michigan, are working in new types of pavement that can withstand studs)

Other Comments/Concerns:
• Clubs are shifting to a different type of grant-in-aid program that is performance based, where the clubs get trail maintenance payments up front in four payments (as opposed to incurring the costs and then seeking reimbursements) – this will help on the financial end and make it easier for the clubs to manage resources
• To get grant-in-aid, the club has to go through a petition process to get funding for new trails, which must be operational for at least two years before they qualify
OHV RIDERS

Over the last decade, the growth in ATVs in Minnesota has been significant, from roughly 12,000 units in 1988 to over 260,000 units by 2004. In recent years, OHV riders across the state have become more organized in promoting their activity, establishing riding areas, and educating the public about OHVs. This also seems to be the case in Beltrami County, where OHV use, especially ATVs, has grown and the need to organize has become more important. Through this planning process, the OHV supporters recognize and appreciate their first real opportunity to participate in a thoughtful way about how to best manage use so that riders can continue to have access to county lands. The following summarizes the key points made during their interview.

Current Circumstances:

• Currently, there are no established OHV trails on county land, with virtually all riding being through the informal use of forest roads and trails
• There are distinct types of riders that need to be accommodated, including those that like riding on designated trails and those that use their ATV for local access to forests for recreation and utilitarian purposes

Opportunities for Improvements:

• Establishing defined OHV trails would be of great value to many OHV riders, whereby they would be more assured of where it is acceptable to ride and take pressure off many of the trails now used in the forest
• Designated trails should be designed to include a mixture of trail types, including on-road trails, trail conversions, and dedicated trails (a minimum of 25 miles needed for a designated trails, with 80 or more miles preferred)
• An established trail should include a trailhead, camp sites along the trail, and other typical amenities, especially signage and access to services
• Trail information and mapping should be readily available, including on the internet
• Maintaining informal access to forest roads and trails is also important for those using their ATVs for utilitarian purposes

Building Relationships with Other Trail Users:

• In general, OHV riders try to maintain good relationships with other trails users and like the idea of continuing multiuse of trails where possible (horseback riders noted during their interview that they rarely have problems with OHVs on trails)
• There is a general recognition that reckless trail users are of growing concern and reflect poorly on the activity, with the concern being that access will get more restrictive over time if problems become pervasive (most of this is attributed to unsupervised younger riders who are out having fun and either are not aware of the problems they are causing or don’t really care)

Other Comments/Concerns:

• The group is trying to get organized enough to be successful in taking advantage of grant-in-aid programs to help establish and maintain trails, modeled after the snowmobile trail program
• In order for ATVs to use peer pressure to encourage responsible riding, the County needs to be clearly define what trail abuse looks like so that trail riders understand what is acceptable and what is not
HORSEBACK RIDERS

Most horseback riders in the region are associated with the Minnesota Horse Council and local riding groups. The former provides extensive support to local groups, including funding through a proposal process. The following summarizes the key points made during their interview.

Current Circumstances:

- Currently, there are no established horse trails on county land, with virtually all riding being informal use of forest roads and trails
- Small groups will often travel to designated horse camps with trails for overnight stays and multi-day riding opportunities
- A typical horse ride is 10 – 15 miles per outing; 30 – 40 for a weekend (which is 2 to 4 mph for a 3 to 5 hour ride)

Opportunities for Improvements:

- Establishing a designated trail is not as important as providing a designated camp area adjacent to a network of informal trails in the forest, with the optimal location being an area not heavily used by OHV riders
- A designated camp area is needed and should have a minimum of 13 sites with a few specific amenities, such as picket line (posts at 10’ spacing with a cable to hitch horses at each site), water, vault toilets, manure pit, open flat area for rigs, area for an obstacle course, electrical power, pavilion, and possibly a corral
- Notably, the group has access to some funding to help develop camps, with the main concern getting the site designated on public land
- Trail information and mapping should be readily available, including on the internet

Building Relationships with Other Trail Users:

- In general, horseback riders have found OHV-type trail users to be courteous, with conflicts being minimal
- From time to time, there have been issues with cross-country ski trails, where horseback riders have been accused of damaging the trails (but this is more the exception than the rule)
- Horseback riders are generally not reckless trail users simply because their horses could sustain injury if they were to go into areas that are not well established, too wet, or mucky

Other Comments/Concerns:

- There is a growing concern that access to private land will become more limited as more people move to the area with different ideas on providing access (this, in turn, will force them to rely more on public lands)

HUNTERS

Hunting advocates consist of individual hunters and organized groups. Members of the Ruffed Grouse Society and Minnesota Deer Hunters Association participated in the interview process.

The Society is a 501c3 conservation organization dedicated to creating and maintaining habitat for ruffed grouse, woodcock and other young forest wildlife. Their members are primarily sportsmen and women who advocate for the future of sport hunting. Most grouse hunters either hunt grouse by walking or riding forest trails, or use forest roads to get into huntable habitat (areas of active forest management). The following summarizes the key points made during their interview.
Current Circumstances:
• Hunters are likely using all huntable forest roads and trails on forested county lands, either to access huntable areas or directly for hunting
• Trails provide access to remote hunting areas, food (clover) that attracts game and allows opportunities to hunt without the concern of getting lost
• Deer hunters commonly use ATVs as a means to access their hunter area and stand and drag out deer

Opportunities for Improvements:
• Better enforcement of trail use regulations in areas closed to motorized use, better maintenance (filling large waterholes, seeding clover, periodic mowing and clearing of down trees) and better (consistent) signage
• Hunting trails should be concentrated in aspen-dominated areas, which is the best habitat for food sources and shelter
• Providing more designated hunting/walking trails is desired (by grouse hunters) as access to private lands becomes harder to come by

Building Relationships with Other Trail Users:
• Use of trails for multiple purposes at different seasons whenever possible is fine, but there is a concern that some combined uses of trails can lead to reduced support for habitat management (for example, recently a resource manager decided to limit aspen harvesting around a designated hunter walking trail because it was also a cross country ski trail in winter and skiers complained about clearcuts, which actually create the best grouse, deer and woodcock habitat)

Other Comments/Concerns:
• Cooperate with state and federal land managers whenever possible to create organized trails for all uses, especially creating loop trails (rather than dead ends) whenever possible
• Motorized use during wet periods should be restricted if the use is damaging road beds with rutting and/or erosion problems, although it can be allowed in many areas during frozen ground conditions (this will result in limited conflict, as most grouse hunting is essentially over by the start of deer season, even though the grouse season continues until the end of December)
• Some concern that grouse can be over-hunted in heavily used motorized areas close to metro areas
• The Society has provided funding for trails and timber access systems in the past and will continue to do so in the future (also often provide money for development, if it allows access for timber harvesting, although the amount of funding spent on trail maintenance is limited due to other ongoing costs)

Dog Sledding

Although a relatively small group compared with other trail user groups, dog sledding is a well established activity in the Bemidji area. The local advocates have also developed and maintain one of the country’s premier trails, which will be showcased on the “Pro Tour” in February of 2006. This event will draw mushers from around North America.

Local mushers are either sprint mushers, who use packed and groomed trails for sprint racers, or general mushers, who use trails in the woods for general dogsledding. There are also mid-distance and long distance mushers. The following summarizes the key points made during their interview.
Current Circumstances:
• Generally, local mushers apply for an annual permit to develop a temporary trail for a weekend event each winter (the trail has most recently been located along the old Soo Line ROW)
• The one major event held each year (i.e., Paul Bunyan Sled Dog Challenge) is in its 33rd year and is part of the Pro Tour (February, 2006)
• The temporary trail is long enough for sprint racing, but is not suitable for mid-distance or longer races
• The group has worked with local snowmobile and ski clubs for maintaining the temporary trail for events, but this can be very limiting given restrictions of grant-in-aid programs and lack of time

Opportunities for Improvements:
• Establishing a trail for the entire winter-season (suitable for sprint and mid-distance races) would be optimal
• Would also like to use the trail for off-season training, where carts are pulled instead of a sled
• If a year-round facility was developed, a more formal staging area would be required, especially for parking

Building Relationships with Other Trail Users:
• In general, the group has been very thankful to the snowmobile and ski clubs for helping them out with grooming advice and equipment, especially since they are too small of a group to do it all themselves
• The group would like to find a way to get permission to buy more time from these other groups to maintain their trail on a season-long basis
• For larger events where greater distance is needed, the group would like to work with the snowmobile club to use their trail in the area for mid-distance races (this typically occurs on one weekend each season from 9:30 to 4:00 PM)

Other Comments/Concerns:
• The only concern related to trail conditions was occasional rutting caused by OHV use in the area, with the thought being that this is an isolated few people that are causing the problems

AUDUBON SOCIETY
The Mississippi River Headwaters Audubon Society (MHAS) is located in north central Minnesota and headquartered out of Bemidji. About 200 of the 350 members are located in Beltrami County. The vast majority of members use both Beltrami County and state lands for numerous outdoor recreational activities. The following outlines the key concerns that the group outlined in a position statement and comments made during their interview:
• Wet and erodible road ditches should be identified and closed to ATV traffic
• Road ditches with Showy Ladyslippers and other endangered wildflowers should be identified and closed to ATV travel (one example is the “Ladyslipper Mile” along County Road 15 in Nebish, which was recognized by the Beltrami County Board several years ago)
• Damage to county road rights-of-ways, private driveways, dust, and noise pollution should be prevented (and repair to already damaged county roads rights-of-way and private driveways should be undertaken using State funds allocated for this purpose)
• ATV and OHM use should be permitted on trails specifically established for this purpose, with Beltrami County adopting a “closed unless posted open” policy rather than “open unless posted closed” preferred
• Serious consideration should be given to establishing some non-motorized areas
• Three Island Park and Movil Maze should remain closed to OHV use (Movil Maze is a “precious jewel”)
• Off-road vehicles (4 x 4 trucks) should be restricted to using only forest roads and trails that will permit highway vehicles (if necessary, a “Gilbert” type of OHV park – either public or preferably private – could be established on non-natural resource lands far enough away from natural areas as to not cause a concern or become a distraction)
• Efforts should be made to avoid further introduction of exotic species on public lands, such as spotted knap weed, garlic mustard, and common buckthorn
• The presence of rare and endangered plants and animals should be determined and avoided prior to any new trails being established
• The true economic benefits of trails should be better understood prior to more trails being established

MHAS sees the trend of motorized recreation on public lands moving north, requiring counties south of Beltrami County to review their OHV regulations and make further restrictions. The hope is that Beltrami County looks into some of the existing problems further south and attempts to solve them before they arrive “at our door step.”

PERSPECTIVES RELATED TO OTHER USES/GENERAL COMMENTS

During the course of the interviews, participants with a broader range of interests identified a number of trail-related opportunities or concerns worthy of consideration. These include:
• Establishing a dog park or trail should be considered for year-round use
• Developing and signing a mountain biking loop through Movil Maze, Three Island Park, and other county land was brought up as a real opportunity (could be a combination of single-track and forest trails to create a loop)
• More extensive use of ski trails for summer hiking, hunters, and mountain biking was recommended as a way to increase the value of the existing trails for non-motorized use
• More consideration of expanding designated hunter/walking trails where motorized uses would be more curtailed
• Consider the possibility of biking on the Blue Ox Trail, which is a now a designated snowmobile trail (it was recognized that the snowmobile use would also have to be accommodated for this to happen)
• Packing some trails for winter hiking is needed, perhaps at Movil Maze and Three Island Park
• Greater use of new technology should be considered for enhancing enforcement of trail use rules and tracking reckless trail users (such as automatic cameras mounted in the forest at trouble spots)
• Establish “trail ambassadors” program of volunteers who work with the county to police trails and educate trail users of rules and expectations
• Shared-responsibility multiuse maintenance program, whereby one group undertakes basic trail maintenance at the end of their season and then “turns the trail over” to the next seasonal user (ATV use of snowmobile trails was one cited example)
• Maximizing the use of grant programs as a means to support development and maintenance of trails should be a priority
• An excellent opportunity for establishing a canoe trail along the Turtle River exists and should be considered, which would be of great value to local residents and resort owners
GENERAL INTEREST

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

In addition to the defined user groups, a number of other interviews were held with other stakeholders, which the following summarizes.

Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe: Is a sovereign nation that is interested in promoting tourism in the area and on the reservation. The Band is excited to participate in the process and sees a number of opportunities and some points to focus on, including:

• Expanding motorized and non-motorized trails through the region, including the reservation, to promote tourism and economic development
• Establishing joint-powers type of agreements where appropriate as part of an overall recreational trails plan (as the plan affects their community and lands)
• Reinforcing the fact that the Band welcomes visitors and tourists to their community and hopes to use processes such as this as a way to expand the working relationships with the county, local townships, and cities in a positive and fruitful manner for mutual benefit
• Looking forward to being equal partners on trail development initiatives that affect the Band and the county

Chamber and Resorts: The following key observations about the resort industry (as defined by resort owners) add some perspective as to how trail development might be a factor in the local economy:

• The resort industry is constantly challenged by changing economic trends at both a local and national level that greatly affect their ability to stay profitable
• On the local level, increasing land values put upward pressures on local taxes that eat away at the bottom line, making it more difficult to stay competitive in luring tourist that have a growing number of choices in the same price range
• Resorts have become more selective in the clientele they pursue, with summer tourism being much more predictable than in winter (fickle weather conditions, kids in school, more costly to operate facilities all bode poorly for being profitable with winter operations)
• Summer tourist patterns have changed over the years as well, with more and more weekend rentals being common in lieu of week-long stays
• Bemidji tourism and resort tourism are different, with the former appealing more to those wanting full amenities and the later appealing to those wanting to get away from things
• In many cases, the value of land is getting to the point where it is simply economically more advantageous to subdivide a resort and sell it off than it is to run it

With the above in mind, it is easy to understand that resorts are very supportive of developing more trails in the county to expand the tourist base. This is especially the case with summer-use trails. The same holds true with local cities and townships, where a more robust trail network would bode well for promoting the area as a recreation destination.

United States Forest Service: The agency is responsible for managing the Chippewa National Forest, about 1/5 of which is within Beltrami County. The following are highlights of their forest plan as it relates to trails:

• Roads in the forest are classified by level, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 being the highest
• All levels of roads are closed to OHV use unless posted open
• Level 3, 4, and 5 roads are generally for regular vehicle use and closed to OHV use
• Some level 1 and 2 roads will be open for OHV use if posted open
• Cross-country travel by OHVs is expressly prohibited in the forest
• In the entire forest there are 2600 miles of roads
• Approximately 2000 miles of these are level 1 and 2, many of which will be open for OHV use
• Another 90 miles of new designated OHV trails are allowed to be developed under the forest plan, although no location for those trails has been established
• In Beltrami County, a number of areas are defined as Hunter/Walking Areas where OHVs are prohibited
• Horseback riding is allowed in Hunter/Walking Areas, but the development of a campground for this use would not likely be allowed

Albeit limited, findings from research on trail-related recreation trends is generally consistent with the information obtained from stakeholders and the general public during the public process. The most pertinent and recent study was conducted in 2004 by MN DNR covering a host of outdoor activities. The following summarizes the relevant findings.

Ranking of facilities* needed by northwest Minnesota counties:
1) Motorized off-highway vehicle trails
2) Paved trails for walking, hiking, skating, and biking
3) Unpaved trails for walking, hiking, and biking
4) Nature interpretive trails
5) Horseback trails
6) Skateboard parks
7) Camper cabins
8) Modern campgrounds with electrical
9) Fishing piers
10) Accessible hunting blinds, stands, and areas for people with disabilities

* Over 40 outdoor facilities were listed, with trails being the most sought after facilities by a wide margin.

Most important reasons Minnesotan’s participate in outdoor recreation:
• Enjoying natural scenery (71%) and smells and sounds of nature (63%)
• Exercise (59%) and feeling healthy (55%)
• Spent time with family (57%)
• Escape pressures (of life) (57%)
• Catch or harvest game or fish (42%)
• Learn and explore (39%)

The lack of time (61%) and outdoor pests (59%) were the most cited reasons people don’t participate more. With the development of more trails in the county, presumably more people will have enough time to enjoy an outdoor trail activity than if they have to travel farther.

PARTICIPATION PROJECTIONS – 2004 THROUGH 2014

For most recreational activities, participation rates are expected to either remain relatively stable or decline out to 2014. Participation in walking, for example, is expected to remain virtually the same at around 54%. Participation in the more active activities, like biking and inline skating, are expected to drop-off over time, presumably due to an aging population. Note, however, that growth in the regional population over the same time period will likely balance out any declines in participation rates, with overall demand for most facilities continuing to grow.
The one major exception to a slow-growth scenario pertains to off-road ATV riding, in which the projected growth over the 10 year period is nearly 252%. Although sales of ATV’s have shown some signs of slowing since the study was done, it is clear that participation in this activity will remain very strong for the foreseeable future.

A complete summary of findings from DNR’s research can be found on their website under “Department reports” at http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/aboutdnr/reports/index.html.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings from the public process, it is apparent that all of the stakeholder groups are well aware of the issues surrounding trails in Beltrami County and share a willingness to work together to find reasonable solutions. Although the way in which each group might address a particular situation may vary, it is clear that everyone has a common goal of maintaining multiple use of public lands that can be indefinitely sustained in a responsible manner.

Based on the findings and the supportive research, it is also very clear that Beltrami County has picked a very advantageous time to develop a recreational trails plan to proactively address current needs and position the County well for meeting whatever future needs that might arise.
End of section. This page is purposefully blank.
The designated recreational trails plan defined in this section addresses all types of motorized and non-motorized trails on county-owned land. Although technically managed under the Forest Management Plan, the informal use of forest access routes is also considered in this section to establish their interrelationship with designated trails, which has important design, operations, management, and maintenance implications.

Classifications define the various types of trails that are included in the Recreational Trails Plan. The classifications are consistent with those that are commonly used in Minnesota as defined in the Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines (MNDNR, 2006).

The trail classifications used in Beltrami County’s trail system fall into three categories, as illustrated in the following graphic.

**Overview of Trail Classifications**

Recreational access to county-owned land falls into three classification categories, with “designated recreation trails” being for formal, specialized recreational uses and “forest access routes” and “restricted forest access routes (hunter/walker trails)” for informal recreational and other uses. As the graphic illustrates, an expressed desire with the development of a designated trail system is to shift use from forest access routes to designated trails to the greatest degree possible. (This is considered in more detail on the next page.)

**Current Situation**

Currently, the lack of a designated recreational trail system forces heavy reliance on the forest access routes to meet trail needs. As the trail plan is implemented, overall use pressures will, presumably, shift more and more to designated trails where uses can be more readily managed.

(The size of the circles graphically represent a relative shift of use pressures over time. It is based on the presumption that users will prefer a well-designed designated trail, and not a result of new restrictions on forest access routes.)

**Future Situation**

- Designated trails designed for a specific use
  - Shared-use paved trail (asphalt surfaced)
  - Hiking trail (natural surfaced)
  - Equestrian trail (natural surfaced)
  - Mountain biking trail (natural surfaced)
  - OHV trail (natural surfaced)
  - Cross-country ski trail
  - Snowmobile trail
  - Dogsledding trail
- Higher level of use promoted
- Routine management provided
- Routine maintenance provided

- Open for informal motorized and non-motorized use (if consistent with Forest Management Plan)
- Lower level use envisioned and promoted
- Very limited management provided
- Very limited maintenance provided

- Sub-classification of Forest Access Routes, but with more restrictions due to ecological, economic, or use impact reasons
- Low level use envisioned and promoted
- Very limited management provided
- Very limited maintenance provided
The Distinction Between Designated Recreational Trails and Forest Access Routes

The distinction between the classification categories is important relative to the levels of design, management, and maintenance that will be provided by the County and/or a local trail group. As illustrated in the last graphic, designated trails are formal trails for specific types of uses. The design, management, and maintenance of these trails will be consistent with accepted standards. Use of these trails will be actively promoted and managed, either by the County or a local sponsoring group.

Conversely, forest access routes are for informal use and will not be managed or maintained for any specific type of recreational use unless designated as part of a recreational trail system. Any use of these corridors is at the discretion of the individual as long as that use is consistent with the management of the forest as defined under the Forest Management Plan.

As informal corridors, individual forest access routes or hunter/walker trails are not included as part of the designated recreational trail system. Instead, areas where forest access is permitted are defined in broader terms as part of the overall Forest Management Plan.

Encouraging the Use of Designated Trails Over Forest Access Routes

One of the main reasons for developing designated recreational trails is to shift some of the growing use pressure away from forest access routes over to trails that are designed to accommodate higher levels of use. By shifting use to designated trails, there is a much greater chance that informal recreational access to the forest can remain relatively unrestricted even as overall recreational demand increases over time. The following graphic illustrates this important point.

Shifting Use Away From Forest Access Routes To Designated Recreation Trails

Beltrami County is attempting to maintain a balance between accommodating increasing demand for recreational access to the forest and responsibly managing and protecting the forest resource. The designated recreation trails defined under this plan play an important role in this effort, as the following illustrates.

Designated trails must be well designed, mapped, signed, and promoted to entice their use and reduce use pressure on forest access routes.

The implicit intent of the plan is to shift use pressures away from forest access routes to designated trails to help ensure that the former can remain relatively unrestricted for informal, lower volume use over an indefinite period of time.

Forest access routes are available to those that find them on an informal basis, with very little, if any, formal route mapping and promotion by the County or advocacy groups in order to help limit use pressures.

The long term importance of managing use levels in the forest cannot be overstated. If recreational use of these lands continues to grow to the point where impacts become unacceptable, the County will have to increasingly consider imposing greater restrictions on access in order to protect the forest resource. Through the adoption of this recreational trails plan and promoting the use of designated trails, greater confidence can be gained that restricting the use of forest access routes will not become a necessity.
The designated recreational trails plan includes a variety of trails under a number of classifications to meet the needs of many types of trail users throughout the year. The plan includes:

- Shared-use paved trails (asphalt surfaced) for walking, bicycling, and inline skating
- Hiking trails (natural surfaced)
- Equestrian trails (natural surfaced)
- Mountain biking trails (natural surfaced)
- OHV trails (natural surfaced)
- Cross-country ski trails
- Snowmobile trails
- Canoe trails
- Dogsledding trails

The design, management, and maintenance of each of these trails will be based on accepted industry standards, as defined in the *Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines* (MN DNR, 2006) – albeit modified as appropriate for use in Beltrami County.

The accompanying *Beltrami County Recreational Trails Master Plan* provides an overview of the proposed trail system for the county. The following considers each type of trail in greater detail.

**OFF-HIGHWAY VEHICLE (OHV) TRAILS**

The development of a designated area for OHV trails is one of the major features of the proposed trail system plan. The OHV trails will be designed for recreational trail riders and long distance tourers seeking well-designed trails in a natural setting with varying levels of difficulty.

The trails will accommodate, to varying degrees, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), off-highway motorcycles (OHMs), and off-road vehicles (ORVs). Of the three, trails for ATV use will likely be the most extensive based on popularity, although some level of demand for OHM and ORV specific trails also exists in the county. The extent to which each of these uses are ultimately accommodated is a detail design consideration that will be determined as part of the implementation process – which will include additional input from OHV advocacy groups on the types of trails most needed.

**Location and Configuration of Designated OHV Trail System**

The designated OHV trail area is located on county-owned land northwest of Wilton along an abandoned Soo Line rail grade. The primary trailhead is situated just north of the intersection of U.S. Highway 2 and Minnesota Highway 89.

This area was selected for OHV use for primary three reasons: 1) contiguousness of County-owned land linked together by the abandoned rail grade; 2) preferred soil conditions relative to other areas in the county; and 3) relative ease of access from the regional population center and major road systems.

As illustrated in the graphic on the next page, the trail will start at a designated trailhead, with the main or core trail following the abandoned rail grade. Stacked loops of varying difficulty and length will be provided off the main trail within the identified “search areas”. The loops will be designed to accommodate either a variety or a specific type of OHV, depending on local demand.
The OHV trail loops will consist of a mix of new trails, existing rail grades, old roads, and forest access routes where possible to limit the built footprint and provide a diverse and interesting trail experience. In some cases, the alignments of existing access routes used for these trails may be altered to meet design standards and improve the quality of the trail experience. The photos on the next page highlight the varying character of the different types of trails that would be used to create an OHV trail in the search areas.

The overall length of the OHV trail system that can be reasonably accommodated within the search area is likely to be in the 25 to 40 mile range – which should be adequate for day outings or a weekend of riding. The level of difficulty, tightness of the design, and average trail speeds will all factor into the carrying capacity of the trail and the time it will take for an average rider to cover the entire system.

Under a phased approach, initially limiting development to a 20 to 25 mile looped trail system has merit to further understand demand and test trail design approaches and maintenance practices, as well as determine actual
Abandoned rail grades (left) and existing forest access routes (center) will be converted into designated OHV trails where feasible to limit the built footprint in the forest. New dedicated trails (right) will also be developed to complete the looped system. The extent to which each of these types of alignments will be used will be determined during the detailed design process at the point of implementation. Careful assessment of ecological impacts is a key aspect of selecting trail routes and alignments.

Operating costs. Subsequent phases could be used to expand the trail system as warranted by demand and the capacity of the County and local advocacy groups to maintain the trail system.

As illustrated on the previous map, a number of search areas are identified as areas for trail loops. The length of each loop will vary depending on type of use and level of difficulty. Providing a series of two-way loops of 2 to 5 miles each off the core trail is a common approach. Two-way traffic is generally recommended to limit speeds and extend riding opportunities.

Providing “technical challenge areas” is also included as part of the OHV trail system. These are areas where riders are allowed to be more aggressive and test their skills and machines in a controlled setting. If well-designed, challenge areas can help reduce the likelihood of rough riding occurring along forest access routes, where any damage caused is harder to detect and the ecological impacts harder to remedy.

With OHV trails, particular attention needs to be given to avoiding impacts to sensitive ecological areas within each of the search areas. In addition, adequate buffers should be provided between the trail and adjacent private properties to avoid off-site impacts and disturbances to the greatest degree possible.

Secondary OHV Facility

In addition to the designated OHV trail, the trails plan includes an option for establishing a secondary riding area in an area southeast of Blackduck, largely relying upon the current infrastructure of roads and routes through County, State, and Federal lands where OHV is expressly allowed by the governing agencies. As the largest land owner in this area, much of this system will likely be on designated routes through the Chippewa National Forest as defined by the USFS for specific types of motorized use.

Including a secondary option in Beltrami County’s recreational trail plan is done for two key reasons. The first is to underscore that managing OHV use is a regional issue requiring a high level of cooperation between land managers at the county, state, and federal level if this use is to be successfully accommodated. Although Beltrami County is making a major commitment in this regard under this plan, its efforts alone will likely be inadequate to address this need if participation rates and use levels continue to grow at the same pace as has been the case in the past 10 years.

The second reason this option is included is to give some forethought to building some flexibility into the trails plan given the uncertainty about how fast and to what degree the demand for OHV trails will grow in the county and region. By having this option in place, excess demand can be more quickly understood and readily absorbed in a more managed way, rather than simply being dispersed into the forest.
The last point is important in that use of the informal forest access route system cannot be as readily maintained as a designated trail system, with many routes being incapable of sustaining heavy use levels over an extended period time.

For this reason, the County is encouraged to work closely with MNDNR and the USFS on developing a route-specific plan for OHV riding that would complement the designated OHV trail being proposed on county-owned land. The following map illustrates the general area for the secondary OHV trail system.

### Development Standards and Guidelines

The *Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines* provide the baseline standards for developing OHV trails. These standards provide extensive information on the type of features most desired by OHV riders and guidelines on difficulty levels. The guidelines also provide extensive information on building natural surfaced trails that are both enjoyable to use and capable of withstanding years of day-to-day use. The section on minimizing impacts to ecological systems has particular application for this type of trail.

Potential trailhead facilities include a parking area, loading area, portable restroom, and picnic shelter. An area for warming up and testing machines should also be provided as close to the trailhead as possible. The first loop off the core trail should be no more than 3 miles from the trailhead.
**Shared-Use Paved Trails**

Shared-use paved trails for walking, bicycling, and inline skating and primarily for summer-season use. Two potential paved trail corridors are included in the plan, as the following graphic map illustrates.

**Blue Ox Shared-Use Trail Corridor**

The first and longest proposed shared-used trail follows the existing Blue Ox trail corridor, which is already an established snowmobile trail for winter use. As illustrated on the map on the last page, the Blue Ox trail will essentially be an extension of the existing Paul Bunyan State Trail that currently ends at County Road 20 and Lake Bemidji State Park. As shown, the trail heads north from the park and end at Blackduck, where it will tie into the local trail system and downtown business district. The overall length of this segment will be approximately 18 miles.
Completion of this trail would considerably expand paved trail opportunities in the county and region, attracting both local users and tourists. There are, however, some important qualifiers that must be addressed if the trail is to be developed. The first consideration is that paving the trail must not preclude the use of the corridor for snowmobiling. There are two options in this regard: 1) allow snowmobiles with studded tracks to use the trails or 2) accommodate snowmobiles on an adjacent corridor of equal or better quality than provided by the old rail grade.

With respect to the first option, the prospect of developing new types of pavements that can withstand studs is improving, with a number of states actively testing advanced materials. In addition, a number of states, including Minnesota, are reevaluating the impact that studs have on paved surfaces, with at least some prospect that existing policies could change to allow certain types of studs on paved trails. If either of these scenarios proves true, paving the Blue Ox corridor while preserving existing winter access would become a real possibility.

Although asphalt is not necessary preferred, upgrading the rail grade to a paved surface could benefit snowmobilers in that it will make the corridor much smoother than is currently the case – which might be a worthwhile trade-off.

With respect to the second option, developing an alternate corridor for the snowmobile trail would take a more detailed evaluation of options that could be supported by the local club. Given the limited public land along this corridor and constraints with the width and grade of the existing right-of-way, the first option of paving the trail is likely the more feasible one, although this second approach should not be entirely ruled out.

Another issue with this corridor is that some sections of the old rail grade are privately owned, with the prospects of acquisition uncertain in at least the near term. Although this poses some constraints, finding a suitable route around these areas seems feasible.

**Soo Line Shared-Use Trail Corridor**

The second proposed shared-used trail follows the old Soo Line rail grade from Bemidji to Rognlien Park, an existing County-owned park near Wilton. As illustrated on the previous map, the Soo Line trail would be an extension of the City of Bemidji’s planned trail following the same abandoned rail corridor, which ultimately connects with the Paul Bunyan Trail and other local trails. As shown, the trail follows a northwest alignment from Bemidji over to Rognlien Park, which is an appealing terminus point. The park offers a swimming beach and other amenities. The trail could also link to local streets within Wilton, providing local residents access to an extensive local and regional trail system. The overall length of this segment will be approximately 6 miles.
As illustrated on the map, the trail leaves the rail grade in order to make its way over to the county park. The alignment shown on the plan, which is conceptual, traverses across county-owned land to the degree possible. Outside of public lands, the trail may have to follow existing or future road rights-of-way if easements across private properties cannot be acquired. Nonetheless, this trail corridor could be of considerable recreational value for local residents and tourists. It would also promote more use of the county park as a destination within relatively easy biking or inline skating distance from the regional population center.

As with the Blue Ox Trail, this trail corridor could be used in the winter for snowmobiling if the issue of studs can be successfully addressed.

**Development Standards and Guidelines**

Both of these shared-use paved trail corridors should be consistent with regional or state level trail standards, which is a 10 foot wide asphalt trail suitable for walking, bicycling, and inline skating. Each of these trails should also meet accessibility standards, which as a general rule means grades of 5 percent or less. Achieving this should not be an issue given the existing grades on the old rail beds.

The *Minnesota Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines* again provide the baseline standards and guidelines for developing shared-use paved trails. Other applicable standards, such as the MN DOT Bicycle Facility Design Guide, should also be referenced, especially if specifically required for grant funding.

**Cross-Country Ski Trails**

Cross-country ski trails are currently provided at a number of locations within the county. On county land, established trails are provided at the Movil Maze and Three Island Park, each of which are well-liked venues by local skiers. The Movil Maze offers 14 kilometers of trails for classic and skate-style skiers. Three Island Park offers 25 kilometers of trails for classic and skate-style skiers. Of the two, Movil Maze trails are geared toward intermediate and advanced skiers, with Three Island Park more for beginners and intermediate skiers.

Other ski venues in the area include:

- Montebello Trail, which has lighting, is provided within a City of Bemidji park and is 4.5 kilometers long. Classic and skate-style skiers are accommodated.
- Buena Vista is on private land and open to the public only in the winter. 25 kilometers of trails are groomed for classic and skate-style skiers.
- C.V. Hobson Memorial Forest provides 7 kilometers of classic-style trails on land owned by Bemidji State University.
- Lake Bemidji State Park offers 16 kilometers of trails for classic skiers.

The graphic on the next page illustrates the existing locations for ski trails.

The local cross-country ski club also has a desire to develop trails in two new areas, both of which would be on state-owned land as identified on the overall *Beltrami County Recreational Trails Master Plan*.

**Movil Maze and Three Island Park Cross-Country Ski Trails**

The cross-country ski trails at both of these locations are considered high quality venues by local skiers. Movil Maze in particular is well liked for the variety and challenge of the skiing terrain and is a heavily used venue. The trails within both of these areas have been developed and maintained primarily by the local cross-country ski club.
Over time, the local club has and continues to make yearly improvements to these trails. Desired improvements at the Movil Maze and Three Island Park venues include:

- Add more barriers to prevent unauthorized use of the trails during the off-season
- Improve signage
- Reroute trails in select locations to improve trail quality, make grooming easier, and reduce impacts on sensitive ecological systems (this is especially the case where trails go through or are near the edge of wetlands and water bodies)
- Improve landscaping in select locations to improve site aesthetics

Another significant issue with ski trails is managing off-season use of the trails, with the main issue being damage caused by ATVs that bypass barriers. The management of natural resources and timber harvesting also affects ski trail quality and site aesthetics and needs more discussion. These and related issues are considered in more depth under Parks and Recreation Areas later in this section.

Since conflicts between skiers and snowmobilers seem to be minimal, the need to alter any of the existing trails does not appear necessary in the Movil Maze or Three Island Park. That said, realigning either type of trail may have merit at times in order to improve the respective trail systems or accommodate resource management and timber harvesting. In these cases, the County will work with each group to ensure that new trail alignments do not adversely affect existing ones.

**Development Standards and Guidelines**

The existing trails in Movil Maze and Three Island Park have established a high standard for trail quality. Any new trails should be consistent with that standard.
The Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines may also add to existing knowledge and be of value in designing and developing new trail loops or realigning existing ones. The guidelines may be particularly useful for laying out trails in ecologically-sensitive areas.

**Mountain Biking Trails**

Mountain biking within the county has been relatively informal in the past, with most of the use occurring on forest access routes or on trails within Movil Maze and Three Island Park. At lower use levels, mountain biking on designated ski trails does not pose much of an issue. If demand grows, however, a single or double track may develop that increasingly affects trail grooming for skiing. To avoid this situation, and to promote the activity, a designated mountain bike trail is included in the plan, as the following graphic illustrates.
Beltrami County Recreational Trails Plan

Location and Configuration of Designated Mountain Bike Trail System

As illustrated on the graphic, the designated mountain bike trail will be a combination of single track trails on county-owned land, forest access routes on county and state land, and signed roads to create a large core loop. From the core trail, “stacked” loops (i.e., loops that interconnect with each other) will be provided offering varying levels of challenge. Most of the stacked loops will be single track trail within Movil Maze and Three Island Park.

The overall core looped trail will be approximately 20 to 25 miles long and suitable for most riders. Each of the stacked loops will range from 1 to 5 miles and vary in level of difficulty. The overall system of trails at full development could range between 35 and 40 miles.

The extent to which loops are developed will be based on demand. Initially, developing an interconnected loop between Movil Maze and Three Island Park has the most merit. Under subsequent phases, the trail could be expanded to include the larger core loop as shown on the plan. Although the routes along the roads are less interesting than single track, riders will follow the routes if they are reasonably safe and well-signed. As with OHV trails, a phased approach is recommended to ensure that trails are not over-built relative to demand, and that the trails can be adequately maintained.

As shown on the master plan, a trailhead is proposed in Movil Maze and Three Island Park. Parking and an information kiosk are the primary amenities needed for the trail.

With the increasing use pressures on Movil Maze and Three Island Park, the development of any new mountain biking trails will have to be considered in the context of other forms of development that might occur on these properties. (This and related issues are considered in more depth under Parks and Recreation Areas later in this section.) In addition, mountain bike trails make for excellent snowshoeing corridors in the winter, especially the single track trails.

Development Standards and Guidelines

The core mountain bike trail will largely follow existing forest access routes across county or state land that will designated for this use. In many cases, the corridor for the core trail follows those used for snowmobiles. As wider trails, the core trails will be two-way and either single or double track, depending on the width of the existing tread. Although new sections of trail may be required, the vast majority of the core trail should follow existing routes to avoid expanding the built footprint in the forest. This trail should also be generally suitable for all levels of mountain bikers.

The stacked loops off of the core trail should purposefully offer a variety of challenge levels, with the majority of these trails being one-way single track. Notably, single track trails for mountain bikes follow considerably different design guidelines than cross-country ski trails. Therefore, these uses should be separated as new trails are developed. The Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines provide baseline standards and guidelines for developing mountain bike trails. Advocacy groups should also be involved in the design of these trails to ensure that they meet the nuanced needs of the user.

In situations where the trail follows a road, adequate signage should be provided for direction and to alert motorists of the shared use.
SNOWMOBILE TRAILS

As with cross-country ski trials, the snowmobile trail network is well-established throughout the county, mostly through the efforts of the local snowmobile clubs supported by funding through the state grant-in-aid program. Overall, the snowmobile network is close to the maximum mileage that the local clubs can develop and maintain. Future efforts will focus mostly on maintaining the existing system and finding reroutes for trails where access is restricted for any number of reasons.

Location and Configuration of Designated Snowmobile Trail System

The accompanying Beltrami County Recreational Trails Master Plan illustrates the snowmobile trail network throughout the county. As shown, the trail system traverses across public and private lands. Each year, the trail network changes to some degree as private property trail agreements expire or properties change hands and access becomes more restricted.

Of all the issues, incrementally losing access to private property is the most perplexing and threatening to the snowmobile trail network. The loss of trails due to private land access becoming more restricted is a hard problem to solve other than to rely more on public lands for trail routes, which is also self-limiting. To this end, the County and local advocacy groups are encouraged to proactively keep track of new route options and actively educate and market to new property owners to maintain access.

Another perplexing issue relates to ATV riders wrongfully assuming that the snowmobile trail corridors across private property are open to their use in the summer. More aggressively signing and gating closed areas, educating trail users about offseason use, and working with local law enforcement are all recommended to help forestall growth of this problem.

Improvements to the trails should focus on providing more variety in the types of trails offered. Currently, the system has too many straight sections that are less interesting and entice snowmobilers to go fast, sometimes excessively so. Adding more sections with curvilinear layouts and more variety in terrain would add value to the overall system.

Improving the signage along the trail and providing better mapping and information on access points and services were also objectives of the local clubs in forthcoming years.

Development Standards and Guidelines

As with cross-country ski trails, the existing network of trails has established a high standard for trail quality and any new trails should be consistent with that standard. The Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines may also add to existing knowledge and be of value in designing and developing new trails or realigning existing ones. The guidelines may be particularly useful for laying out trails in ecologically-sensitive areas.

A 2005 publication entitled Guidelines for Snowmobile Trail Groomer Operator Training by the International Association of Snowmobile Administrators (IASS) is also a recommended reference for grooming trails. It is available through the organization’s website.
**Canoe Trails**

There are two canoe trails included under the recreational trails plan, each of which offering exceptional opportunities to explore the forests and countryside of the county. The Mississippi River Canoe Trail is the most recognizable of the two as it flows through various lakes in the southern part of the county. This is a well-established route that residents are familiar with and some have actually paddled or boated. The Turtle River Canoe Trail is perhaps less known, but also highly regarded by those most familiar with it. The following graphic illustrates these routes.
The section of the Mississippi River that flows through the county is in excess of 35 miles, with the Turtle River being 30 or more once the many bends are factored into the distance.

**Turtle River Canoe Trail**

As the last graphic illustrates, the Turtle River Trail could begin as early as Little Turtle Lake and continue on all the way to Cass Lake. As the smaller of the two routes, this river is best paddled in early spring or after a heavier period of rain, especially the upper section where a few rocky sections and old dams are encountered. A number of portages will have to be developed or enhanced along the upper sections to make the river more navigable and remove some of the uncertainty about portages around obstacles. Periodic clearing of deadfalls and sweepers will also be required to entice higher levels of use.

There are a number of options for river access points and canoe launches, many of which could be simply pull-offs at road crossings. On county land, a designated canoe launch at Three Island Park would be appropriate and should be integrated with other park uses. This and related issues are considered in more depth under Parks and Recreation Areas later in this section.

Much of the lower section of the river flows through the National forest, where an older historic dam, rice beds in lakes, and a US Forest Service Campground are encountered. Once to Cass Lake, the river connects into the Mississippi River flowage.

**Mississippi River Trail**

As the last graphic illustrated, the Mississippi River flows though a widely varying landscape, ranging from lowland bogs to forest and lakes. Although much of the river can be canoed throughout the warm season, the segment above Lake Irving is less certain in terms of flowage during drier periods. Some of the upper sections are also unnavigable due to downed trees and other debris, which must be cleared to make the river trail safer for family canoe travel.

As with the Turtle River route, there are a number of options for river access points and canoe launches, many of which could be simply pull-offs at road crossings.

**Development Standards and Guidelines**

Detailed route mapping, clearly defined access points and portages, and routine monitoring and periodic clearing of downfalls and debris along the course of these river trails are the most important development considerations. Otherwise, development can be as simple as creating some walk-in put-in points or providing a small dock for launching a canoe at strategic locations.

Determining the best location for canoe access points should be part of the formal design for each of these river trails. Access points should be reasonably spaced to accommodate day outings or overnight trips.
EQUESTRIAN TRAILS

Although horseback riding participation rates are lower than many other forms of recreation, Beltrami County has a relatively strong contingent of enthusiasts that like to ride their horses in the forest. For the most part, forest access routes are well suited for horseback riding, especially those that are designated as hunter/walker trails. As such, development of a formal equestrian trail system is not included under this plan.

The plan does provide for the development of a horse camp on county land in proximity to the extensive network of forest access routes and hunter/walker trails located on county, state, and federal land, as the following graphic illustrates.

As illustrated, the horse camp is conceptually located on county land near a county road for ease of access. Note that this location is tentative, with the final location being determined after a more detailed review of siting options at the point of actual implementation. This could include finding a different site than the one represented here if the County and advocacy group determines that this site is not well suited for this use, which might include resource management constraints, lack of access to potable water, or soils not well suited for this type of development.
Note that the County’s role in developing the horse camp is limited to providing the land, with the expectation that the local advocacy group will be responsible for funding the actual development and maintenance of the site. This is considered in more detail in Section 4 – Implementation and Management Plan.

Development Standards and Guidelines

To be viable, the horse camp needs to have a minimum of 13 camping sites on several acres of land. Site amenities typically include a picket line for hitching horses, water, vault toilets, manure pit, open flat area for rigs, an area for an obstacles course, electric power, and possibly a corral. Safe access from the roadway is also important when maneuvering vehicles pulling horse trailers.

The trail network to support the camp needs to be total at least 40 miles for a weekend of riding. The Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines provides additional guidelines on developing horse trails and may be useful for guiding the development of trails needed to connect the camp to the network of forest access routes.

Dogsledding and Skijoring Trails

Although a relatively small group compared with other types of trail users, dogsledding is a well established activity in the Bemidji area. Under this master plan, the area defined for the designated OHV trails would be made available in the winter for seasonal dogsledding and skijoring (dog pulling a person on skis) trails. (These would, in essence, take the place of the trails that these groups have developed on their own in the past in the same general area.)

A total of between 25 and 30 miles of trails would be optimal to accommodate these uses for major events, which currently happen once a year. 15 to 20 miles would be optimal for their day-to-day training needs.

Developing a detailed layout for these trails will require the assistance of local advocates and event organizers in order to meet their specific needs. At a minimum, the trails will likely need to accommodate “sprint racers” and “mid-distance racers,” each of which requiring different types and lengths of trail loops.

The design of these trails should occur in concert with the development of the OHV trail system to ensure that the trail alignments unique to dogsledding and skijoring are integrated into the design for the OHV trails to the degree possible. Under this scenario, the needs of dogsledders and skijorers can be met with few additional development costs, which is important given the limited resources that this group will have to put into the development and maintenance of a trail system specifically for this use.
HIKING TRAILS (NATURAL SURFACED)

The availability of informal hiking trails in Beltrami County is quite extensive. The combination of forest access routes, hunter/walker trails, old rail grades, and off-season use of cross-country ski trails provides residents with many options for hiking. Lake Bemidji State park also offers an extensive network of hiking trails. At the height of the bug season, the paved trails in the Bemidji area also provide access to walking trails that are more open where a breeze can help keep the bugs at bay. For these reasons, the development of designated hiking trails in the near term is not necessary unless one or both of the following conditions occur.

Use of Ski Trails for Hiking Becomes Excessive

Summer use of ski trails in Movil Maze and Three Island Park for hiking has not been an issue with skiers since the use levels are light enough as to not cause problems with tread quality for winter use. However, if use levels rise to the point where a single track tread is worn into the trail surface and affects the grooming operation and the quality of the ski trail, consideration should be given to separating these uses.

Formal Preparation of Park and Recreation Area System Plan

At such a point in time the Movil Maze and Three Island Park are classified as a park or recreation area as part of an overall system plan, developing hiking-specific trails should be considered within the context of other potential recreational uses within these areas. Although the same corridor can be used in some cases, the desired design and alignment of a cross-country ski trail is actually quite different than that of a hiking trail. For example, ski trails often go straight up a fall line of a slope (i.e., directly up the steepest part) to create an interesting downhill run or climb. Conversely, hiking trails tend to traverse across the slope (i.e., work around the slope) to prevent erosion and make the trail less steep for hikers. The Minnesota Trail Planning, Design, and Development Guidelines considers this issue extensively and should be referred to for detailed information on developing both of these types of trails.

FOREST ACCESS ROUTES
AND HUNTER/WALKER TRAILS

As previously defined, “forest access route” is a generic term used to describe a corridor or treadway through the forest that allows machinery, vehicles, or people to access a property. Typically, access routes are recognized as low maintenance roads or logging trails through the forest. As considered in Section 1, forest access routes are technically covered under the Forest Management Plan to ensure that their use is consistent with broader resource management objectives and policies. These routes are considered in this plan to purposefully distinguish them from designated trails.

Use of Forest Access Routes for Recreational Uses

Forest access routes are for un-designated, informal use and will not be managed or maintained for any specific type of recreational use unless formally defined as part of a recreational trail system. The extent to which recreational use will be allowed (or restricted) on these routes will be based on a variety of resource management factors, as defined in Section 4 – Implementation and Management Plan. Nonetheless, use of these routes through the forest is expected to continue to play a role in meeting local recreational and utilitarian needs (i.e. hunting, berry picking, wood gathering, etc.). As of 2005, there is an estimated 500 miles of these routes on the 147,000 acres of County-owned and managed lands. The following graphic highlights their relative distribution on county land.
As illustrated on the map, several areas on county and state land are defined as hunter/walker trail areas where motorized uses are restricted or prohibited. As with forest access routes, restrictions on access to these areas are based on a variety of resource management factors.

**DISTRIBUTION OF FOREST ACCESS ROUTES ON COUNTY LAND**

Although forest access routes are not managed and maintained at the same level as a designated trail, they will be monitored to ensure that recreational or other uses are not causing an unacceptable level of impact that would compromise the management of the resource. This issue is covered in more detail in Section 4 – Implementation and Management Plan.

**HUNTER/WALKER TRAILS**

As shown on the previous graphic, certain areas of the forest are defined as hunter/walker areas. Essentially, these are areas in the forest where motorized uses are restricted. The primary objective with this designation is to provide places where foot access is the primary means to get around, especially in the fall during hunting season. At the discretion of forest resource managers and the County Board, designating an area for hunter/walker trails can also be used for other resource management reasons, such as wildlife habitat improvement.
The extent to which these areas are needed is a more of a resource management issue than it relates to trails per se. However, hunters participating in the planning process would like more of these areas, especially as use pressures grow and there is less “quiet space” left in the forest. The County is encouraged to consider this issue in greater depth as it updates its Forest Management Plan.

From a trails perspective, hunter/walkers come into consideration if motorized use of a forest access route poses excessive impacts and requires use restrictions. Redefining a route or an area of the forest as a hunter/walker area is one means to reduce impacts, as considered in more detail in Section 4 – Implementation and Management Plan.

As defined in Section 1 – Background and Planning Context, the Beltrami County Forest Management Plan covers all aspects of managing the forest for multiple uses. As defined, the plan will ultimately consist of the overarching Forest Management Plan supported by a Recreational Trails Plan, and, ultimately, a Parks and Recreation Areas Plan. The timing of developing the latter of these plans is at the discretion of the County Board and will be based on their perception of when recreational demands reach a threshold where a plan is justified, as was the case with this plan.

Once developed, the Parks and Recreation Areas Plan will complement the Recreational Trails Plan by defining a system of designated parks and recreation areas to support specific types of recreational uses. This would likely include developing a classification system to define the role and function of each type of park or recreation area. As with the trails planning process, public input and trends research is typically used as the basis for determining the demand for an assortment of recreational facilities. In addition to trails, the need for picnic areas, camping facilities, boat/canoe launches, archery ranges, fishing docks, multiuse areas, beach facilities, and any number of other possible facilities and amenities would commonly be considered. Together, the two plans would address the full spectrum of recreational facilities needed throughout the county.

INTERRELATIONSHIP OF FOREST MANAGEMENT PLAN AND PARKS AND RECREATION AREA PLAN

Another important aspect of developing a parks and recreation areas plan would be to determine how to best manage natural resources on these parcels relative to recreational uses. Although forest management (including tree harvesting and disease management) will remain a priority and indefinitely continue on all county lands, the manner in which that occurs may be altered in consideration of recreational uses on properties used for recreational purposes. Under a formal Parks and Recreation Areas Plan, the County would have greater flexibility to shape resource management policies in consideration of recreational uses specific to a given site that would not otherwise affect the management of the larger land resource where recreational use is less of an issue.

By inclusion, trails within designated parks and recreation areas could influence (or be influenced by) resource management practices as deemed appropriate by resource managers, recreation planners, and the County Board as they balance recreational uses with larger resource management interests and goals.
**Select Areas That May Fall Under a Parks and Recreation Areas Plan**

There are several land areas where trails currently exist or are proposed under the *Recreational Trails Plan* that may ultimately be included under a formal *Parks and Recreation Areas Plan*. In consideration of this possibility, planning for recreational trails in these areas purposefully takes a more cautious approach under this plan to avoid doing something in the near term that may limit or preclude future recreational opportunities. The following considers each of these areas and describes an interim approach to the use of these properties for trails.

**Movil Maze and Three Island Park Areas**

Both of these parcels are universally considered by most user groups to be the “jewels,” of the county lands, suggesting that their highest and best use may ultimately be as designated parks or recreation areas at some point in the future. Given this possibility, the intent with the *Recreational Trails Plan* is to maintain the status quo and purposefully limit expansion of recreation trails until such a time that trail uses can be considered in a broader recreational and land use context.

On this basis, the Movil Maze and Three Island Park will continue to be used for established trail activities, including cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, and summer hiking and mountain biking. Modest expansion or realignment of these trails consistent with this plan should not pose any major concerns related to the future recreational planning of these areas. Other than these trail uses, no additional expansion of the trail system is recommended until the County more formally considers how these properties are best used to meet broader recreational and other needs.

Maintaining the status quo on use of these properties will also allow the County time to implement and judge the results of the initial phases of overall trail system plan, which in turn may affect future trail development on these parcels. An example of this relates to motorized uses, whereby the development of a designated OHV trail is expected to reduce the use pressure on forest access routes across county lands. If that proves successful, the need to accommodate this use at the Movil Maze or Three Island Park sites will be of less importance and priority than providing for other recreational uses, such as camping, picnicking, canoeing, nature observation, and other non-motorized trail uses.

**Pine Tree Park and Rognlien Park**

Pine Tree Park is a shared park between Beltrami County and the City of Blackduck under a joint powers agreement. Rognlien is a day-use site on Grant Lake in the City of Wilton with a beach, picnic area, and boat access. Currently, this site is managed by MN DNR.

Future master plans for either of these parks should include interconnections with select county-wide trails (as defined in this section of the *Recreational Trails Plan*). A complete review of developmental, operational, and maintenance needs of these parks is also recommended given the evolving recreational needs of the county and local cities.

Additional public input would also be beneficial to determine how each of these parks is best integrated into a broader, county-wide parks and recreation plan. This should include a complete review of ownership issues and past joint use agreements with other cities and agencies to determine the most efficient and effective way to manage these sites.
Potential To Classify the OHV Area as a Designated Recreation Area

Under a Parks and Recreation Areas Plan, the area designated for OHV trails for summer use and dogsledding, skijoring, and (possibly) snowmobiling in the winter may warrant being formally classified as Recreation Area for multiple recreational uses throughout the year. Under this designation, a higher level of development may be warranted for support facilities since they would support more than one activity. For example, this might include paved parking facilities, restrooms instead of portable toilets, larger picnic shelters, and various forms of overnight camping facilities.
Section 4

Implementation and Management Plan

Overview

Implementing and managing the recreational trail system and forest access routes will require a strong working relationship between the County and the many local and regional advocacy groups to be successful – especially since this is the first formal plan developed by the County for this purpose. This section considers a number of key factors associated with implementing and managing the recreational trail system.

Plan Oversight

As defined in Section 1, many stakeholders share the belief that the County would benefit from having a recreation manager to oversee the implementation of the trails plan. Likewise, establishing a broader, county-wide Recreation Advisory Committee would also help ensure that the interests of all residents and groups are fairly and evenly represented and that decisions about trails are well thought-out, balanced, and respectful of the concerns of all parties. Given the seemingly strong support, hiring a recreation manager and establishing an advisory committee is recommended under this plan.

Under this presumption, the recreation manager and advisory committee would take the lead in implementing the plan, with final oversight and authority resting with the County Board. The responsibilities for each of these are defined on the following box.

Plan Oversight Responsibilities of Recreation Manager, Recreation Advisory Committee, and County Board

Recreation Manager:
- Provide comprehensive oversight of plan implementation, including working with advocacy groups on detailed layouts for trails to ensure consistency with the system plan
- Work with local trail advocacy groups on securing funding from a variety of sources and developing implementation strategies for each type of trail
- Work with natural resources staff to ensure that the location of trails and forest access routes are consistent with the forest management plan
- Proactively address conflicts between user groups to resolve issues fairly and respectfully
- Proactively address trail use problems and unacceptable conditions with user groups and develop strategies to resolve issues, including restrictions on use as appropriate
- Work with the Advisory Committee on the above issues and seek their guidance on balancing interests and determining which solutions are in the best interest of the public good

Recreation Advisory Committee:
- Ensure that implementation is consistent with the system plan
- Represent the interests of all residents and local trail advocacy groups on issues affecting trails
- Ensure that the location of trails and forest access routes are consistent with the forest management plan
- Consider conflicts between user groups to resolve issues fairly and respectfully
- Proactively address trail use problems and unacceptable conditions with user groups and prepare recommendation for consideration and action by the County Board
- Fairly balance the interests of all parties and recommend solutions to the County Board that are in the best interest of the public good

County Board:
- Ensure that implementation is consistent with the overall policies of the County and principles of the Forest Management Plan
- Represent the broader interests of all residents
- Review and approval of recommendations from the Recreation Advisory Committee resolving trail use and development issues
- Fairly balance the interests of all citizens that are in the best interest of the public good

Note that these responsibilities would also transfer to oversight of parks and managed recreation areas at such a point where the County develops a system plan for that purpose.
The forthcoming implementation strategies are based on the findings from the public process and a realistic assessment of the County’s and advocacy groups capacity to provide oversight and secure funding for developing the various types of trails.

**A PRAGMATICALLY PACED APPROACH TO PLAN IMPLEMENTATION**

Since this is its first recreational trails plan, the County does not have the benefit of use data from an established trail system to fully understand current use levels or project future growth in demand for a given type of trail. This is compounded by the fact that general recreation trends are still emerging in the region as the regional economy and demographic characteristics evolve over time. Combined, this leaves an inherent level of uncertainty in the actual demand threshold for each of type of trail, which is an important factor in developing implementation strategies and determining how many miles of a given trail type are actually necessary to meet the need.

Whereas the information gained from the public process and related research provides a compelling and justifiable basis for developing the system plan, it is not substantial enough on its own to justify the full implementation of the plan in the near term. Instead, actual implementation of the plan should be pragmatically paced over a period of time consistent with the County’s and advocacy groups capacity to better understand demand and provide oversight, manage the system, and secure funding. Even if much of the work is done by local advocacy groups, the development of a broad-based trail system will also put additional operational, management, and maintenance responsibilities on the County that will have to be accounted for as implementation occurs. For example, the hiring of a recreation manager and establishment of a **Recreation Advisory Committee** would be examples of the kind of new commitments that the County would be making in order to more formally manage the increasing use of county lands for recreation.

In light of the above, several overarching implementation strategies are recommended, as the following considers.

**Develop a Phased Implementation Plan for Each Type of Trail**

A phased plan for implementing each type of trail defined under the system plan should be prepared, taking into consideration the combined capacity of the County and local advocacy group to fund, develop, operate, and maintain the system. The role of the County and local advocacy groups should be clearly defined to avoid ambiguity. The ramifications of user groups failure to follow through with obligations should also be clearly stated, including the potential for restrictions being placed on trails that pose an unacceptable level of impact on the resource or are inconsistent with the County’s Forest Management Plan.

**Establish a Routine Monitoring Protocol for Trails**

Establishing a routine monitoring protocol for each type of trail is recommended to put the County and local advocacy groups in a proactive position related to understanding use levels, trail use issues and conflicts, and detecting problems at an early stage where they can be more easily remedied.
Establish a Process with Local Advocacy Groups for Addressing Trail Conflicts and Impacts

Clarity in how conflicts and use impacts will be addressed is one of the most important aspects of managing relationships with user groups. Developing a clearly defined policy and process in this regard and communicating that to user groups is highly recommended. “Managing Use Impacts on Designated Trails and Forest Access Routes” in this section provides a basis for this process and a variety of if/then scenarios if problems occur.

Baseline Strategy for Each Trail Type Included Under the Plan

The following provides a starting point for the phasing plan for each type of trail. The strategy builds upon the existing relationship between the County and various advocacy groups to leverage funding avenues that might be available to aid in development and maintenance of the system.

Snowmobile Trails: Strategy focuses on maintaining the existing system and working with local clubs to resolve alignment or access issues as they arise. Key action items include:
- Continue to support local clubs in securing grant-in-aid funding for the trail system
- Work with local clubs on alignment issues on public lands as they occur and finding new routes over time that add interest to the current system
- Work with local clubs on improving mapping/signing of the trail system
- Ensure that all use conflicts that may arise between user groups are expediently resolved

Off-Highway Vehicle Trails: Strategy focuses on fostering the creation of a local advocacy group to work with the County on securing grant-in-aid funding and developing the OHV trail system. Increasing the level of awareness of the OHVer’s responsibility to help manage use and deal with impacts to county land is also a key strategy in order to avoid restricting access to county lands. Key action items include:
- Support the efforts of OHV advocates to form a local club to work with the County on the design and development of the OHV trail system
- Become familiar with and support local club efforts to secure grant-in-aid funding for developing and maintaining OHV trails
- Foster a partnership between all public land owners in the county to develop a strategy for cooperatively addressing broader regional OHV trail issues, especially as it relates to the development of the secondary OHV trail as defined by the plan
- Clearly define riding rules for forest access routes and the process for evaluating and addressing impacts
- Ensure that all use conflicts that may arise between user groups are expediently resolved

Shared-Use Paved Trails: Strategy focuses on continuing to investigate the viability of summer and winter use of paved trails and pursuing grant funding that may be available through State and Federal programs. Also explore with MNDNR the potential for designating these trails as State trails and subject to State funding programs. This is especially the case with the Blue Ox Trail, which is a logical extension of the Paul Buyan Trail. Key action items include:
- Actively monitor changing technology related to trail surfaces that are resistant to impacts by studded snowmobile tracks
- Monitor trail grant opportunities and formally apply for those that meet the criteria, and actively work with MNDNR on the potential to designate all or portions of these trails as State trails
Cross-County Ski Trails: Strategy focuses on maintaining the existing trails on county land as defined by the plan and helping the local ski club resolve trail issues such as illegal motorized uses of ski trail corridors during the off season. Also work with the club on relocating trails that are in conflict with sensitive natural areas and addressing trail conflicts with forest management operations. Key action items include:

- Continue to support local clubs in securing grant-in-aid funding for the trail system
- Work with local clubs on alignment issues as they occur and finding new routes over time that add interest to the current system
- Work with local clubs on improving mapping and signing of the trail system
- Ensure that all use conflicts that may arise between user groups are expeditiously resolved

Mountain Biking Trails: Strategy focuses on fostering the creation of a local advocacy group to work with the County on securing funding and developing the mountain bike trail system. Key action items include:

- Support the efforts of mountain bike advocates to form a local club to work with the County on the design and development of the trail system
- Become familiar with and support local club efforts to secure grant funding for developing and maintaining trails
- Clearly define riding rules for forest access routes and the process for evaluating and addressing impacts
- Ensure that all use conflicts that may arise between user groups are expeditiously resolved

Canoe Trails: Strategy focuses on fostering the creation of a local advocacy group to work with the County on documenting and developing the canoe routes. Key action items include:

- Support the efforts of local canoeists to form a club to work with the County on the design and development of canoe trails
- Foster a partnership with MNDNR and USFS to develop access points and support facilities as defined by the plan
- Removal of downed trees and sweepers to improve safety
- Ensure that all use conflicts that may arise between user groups are expeditiously resolved

Equestrian Trails: Strategy focuses on working with the local equestrian club on the development of a horse camp with direct access to hunter walker trails and forest access routes. Key action items include:

- Support the efforts of the local club to design and develop a horse camp on county-owned land
- Become familiar with and support local club efforts to secure grant funding for developing and maintaining the camp
- Clearly define riding rules for forest access routes and the process for evaluating and addressing impacts
- Ensure that all use conflicts that may arise between user groups are expeditiously resolved

Dogsledding and Skijoring Trails: Strategy focuses on working with the local advocates on fostering their relationships with ski and snowmobile clubs, who may help them to cost-effectively groom their trails. Being part of the process for designing the OHV area to meet their trail needs in the winter is also an important strategy. Key action items include:

- Support the efforts of the local advocates to expand their trails from event-based to full-season trails
- Involve dogsledders and skijorers in the design process for the OHV trail
- Ensure that all use conflicts that may arise between user groups are expeditiously resolved
User Groups and General Public Involvement in Implementing the Plan

Public involvement in the preparation of this plan was well-received by the local advocacy groups, with each group expressing that they felt the County listened even when the plan did not include everything they might have wanted. Continuing to build upon the relationships fostered as part of this public process remains a goal of the County and local groups and is fundamental to implementing the plan at all levels.

With respect to the general public, new opportunities will be provided for input during the implementation phase to ensure that every citizen has an opportunity to participate and discuss pertinent issues prior to actual development of a new trail. Depending on the scale of the project, these opportunities could take the form of a Recreation Advisory Committee hearing, public open house, survey, or by other suitable means as needed to communicate and exchange ideas with interested citizens. The County Board will also follow its routine protocol for public comment as new initiatives are considered.

At the individual trail level, County staff and the Recreation Advisory Committee will take the lead on developing implementation strategies and working with local advocacy groups to develop new trails and address issues with existing ones. At the discretion of the County Board, design and development of trails may involve trail advocates, interested citizens, and trail experts to complement and work with the Recreation Advisory Committee and County staff on implementing the trails plan. Most commonly, these groups or individuals would get involved when they individually or jointly fund projects as part of local fund raising activities or successful trail grants.

Notably, the County will provide oversight for all projects undertaken on county lands irrespective of funding source. The County also reserves the right to preclude development of a trail if it is in conflict with this or other adopted county plans, or as otherwise determined at the discretion of the County Board.

Forest Access Routes: Strategy focuses on shifting as much use away from these forest access routes to designated trails to better manage use. It also focuses on monitoring impacts and addressing situations where use impacts are unacceptable and require action, which could include use restrictions if issues cannot otherwise be resolved.
Managing use impacts on designated trails and forest access routes will be an ongoing concern of Beltrami County to ensure that recreational activities on county land are consistent with the principles of the Forest Management Plan – which are centered around maintaining a sustainable harvest and preserving the forest aesthetic, wildlife values, riparian areas, cultural resources, soils, and water quality. Whereas the County Board is committed to multiple use of county lands to serve a broad public good, all uses must be balanced against the common interest and responsibility of preserving and protecting the resource for future generations.

With respect to recreation, if the type or level of use is determined at any time to conflict with these principles, or otherwise adversely affect the resource, Beltrami County will take action as deemed appropriate by the County Board. This could include any number of options, ranging from redesigning/rerouting a trail, redefining the type of uses allowed, or restricting uses.

Limiting or restricting uses might be warranted for any number of reasons, some due to trail use and others more related to resource management issues. Examples include:

- Safety of trail user due to timber harvest and resource management operations
- Environmental protection of sensitive areas – on a seasonal or year-round basis
- Wildlife habitat protection – on a seasonal or year-round basis
- Seasonal weather patterns causing poor or unstable conditions requiring restrictions on all or some forms of use in a given area of the forest
- Impacts or degradation of the trail and/or surrounding area caused by excessive use, illegal cross-country travel, or wanton destruction

Of all these factors, only the last one is directly related to or caused by recreational uses. To limit instances where this is the impetus for restricting use, defining as objectively as possible the type of impacts that would trigger certain actions is advantageous for both the County and user groups. The following considers this issue in greater detail.

### Defining Impact Thresholds

Thresholds provide trail managers and user groups with a common basis for determining if a trail is causing excessive impacts to the resource. Each threshold marks a point that triggers a certain type of action that results in either a trail remaining open for current uses or is restricted due to an unacceptable level of environmental impact. The following graphic provides guidelines for impact thresholds.

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**Impact Thresholds**

Impact thresholds provide resource managers and trail users with a rational and consistent basis for determining the type of action necessary to help ensure that a trail or forest access route remains open and unrestricted. Each trail classification will have its own set of thresholds consistent with its intended use and level of trail management and maintenance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threshold</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unacceptable Level of Impact – Action Mandated</strong></td>
<td>Increasing level of impacts requires either reclassification (redesign), restricting use, or decommissioning (closure) of the trail to protect natural resource.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questionable Level of Impact – Action Required</strong></td>
<td>Higher level of monitoring and enforcement required to reverse trend toward becoming an unacceptable level of impact. The trail’s classification, design, and use all have to be analyzed to determine the best course of action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anticipated Level of Impact – No Action Required</strong></td>
<td>Properly classified, appropriately designed, and responsibly used. Trail is performing as anticipated and no action is required.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*This threshold is purposefully limited to underscore the importance of taking action as soon as the level of site impact becomes questionable. Otherwise, more drastic action will be required, creating a much more challenging situation to resolve with the affected users groups.*
Impact thresholds should be defined as part of the detail trail design process to ensure that County staff and user groups have a common understanding and expectation about actions that would be taken if a trail’s impact to the site proves to be too excessive to allow.

If a given trail’s condition becomes unacceptable, the action taken depends on its classification, management approach, and level of maintenance. The natural surfaced trails and forest access routes defined under this plan fall into three categories, each of which resulting in different actions if use impacts are unacceptable. The following graphic considers this issue.

**Potential Actions if Trail Use Impacts are Unacceptable**

The action taken if impacts to a trail or forest access route become unacceptable is directly related to its classification and the level of management and maintenance that was expected to be provided. The following highlights the main categories as related to natural trails and forest access routes, each of which entailing different actions if its use impacts exceed acceptable limits. In applying these, it is important to educate trail users of these different scenarios so that they do not assume otherwise.

**Potential Actions if Trail Use Impacts are Unacceptable:**
- **Designated Trails:Designed for a specific use**
  - Hiking Trails
  - Off-Highway Vehicle Trails
  - Equestrian Trails
  - Multiuse Natural Trail
- **Open for informal motorized and non-motorized use (if consistent with overall forest management plan)**
- **Routine management provided**
- **Routine maintenance provided**

**Potential Actions if Forest Access Route Use Impacts are Unacceptable:**
- **New designated trails designed for specific use**
  - Hiking Trails
  - Off-Highway Vehicle Trails
  - Equestrian Trails
  - Multiuse Natural Trail
- **High level of use promoted**
- **Routine management provided**
- **Routine maintenance provided**

**Potential Actions if Trail Use Impacts are Unacceptable:**
- **Redefine as a designated trail for specific use**
  - Provide additional design, management, and stewardship to ensure sustainability
- **Restrict use, such as limiting use to non-motorized activities (hunter/walker trail designation, for example)**
- **Decommission and restore corridor to natural vegetation**

**Potential Actions if Forest Access Route Use Impacts are Unacceptable:**
- **Open for formal motorized and non-motorized use (if consistent with overall forest management plan)**
- **Low level use envisioned and promoted**
- **Very limited management provided**
- **Very limited maintenance provided**

*Since forest access routes and hunter/walker trails are typically only made available if they are used under a low-maintenance scenario, redefining or reclassifying them to a higher level is not extensively or routinely done. More typically, uses become more restricted or the trail is decommissioned to ensure protection of the larger land resource.*

**Defining Impact Thresholds**

A manageable trail is defined as one that can be indefinitely maintained for its intended purposes, assuming routine management and stewardship is provided consistent with its classification. If a trail is well designed and appropriately used, site impacts will stay within acceptable parameters.

Unacceptable conditions arise when the physical condition of a trail passes a defined threshold where site impacts are no longer within defined parameters. Under these circumstances, action is required to avoid continued degradation of the trail and adjoining ecological systems.
For general application, thresholds can be reasonably described using written criteria and photographic illustrations. In practice, all natural trail types tend to exhibit similar physical signs of use impacts, as reflected by rutting, erosion, by-passing, and impacts to adjoining ecological systems and hydrology. The main difference between classifications is the extent to which a particular problem is likely to occur and the type of action taken should an unacceptable condition is found. For example, if rutting occurs on a designated OHV trail due to poor design or unforeseen conditions, realignment would be appropriate to solve the problem to keep the trail operational. This contingency would be part of the management plan for this class of trail. On the other hand, if that same level of rutting was found on a forest access route (where the commitment to management and maintenance is much less), restriction or closure of the area might be in order since OHV use was only allowed if the route remained sustainable.

As a benchmark, the following provides a physical description of acceptable and unacceptable conditions common to various natural surfaced trails. These are general guidelines to be used as a means to alert County staff and trail users if the level of impact is in question. Note that these criteria may have to be adjusted based on site-specific conditions, including soils, vegetation types, hydrology, and other factors.

**Acceptable Level of Impact – No Action Required**

With all natural trail types, a certain level of compaction and displacement is expected and acceptable. It is also acceptable to cross natural drainageways and create a corridor wide enough to accommodate the trail as long as it is done in a manner where site impacts are kept to a minimum.

In general, trail impacts are considered acceptable if the following conditions are found:

- Trail tread is stable and compacted, with a constant outsloped grade and minimal rutting preferred
- Displacement of soils from the trail tread is minimal relative to the use and soil type (with only limited berming on the outside of curves being acceptable)
- Tread drains well with minimal to no signs of ongoing erosion, especially into water bodies of any kind
- Impacts to surrounding ecological systems is limited to the trail tread and directly adjacent clearance zone, with no by-passing and cross-country travel occurring

The following photographs illustrate sustainable conditions associated with a variety of natural trails.
Forest access routes must be well-suited for the recreational use, especially since these are minimal maintenance areas. Corridor closure is the typical result if impacts prove unacceptable.

Rolling grade design and alignment ensures that this ATV trail will remain open for years of use. By managing runoff through dips and crests, erosion can be largely prevented with normal use.

A superelevated curve plus embedded rocks help ensure that this mountain bike trail will remain intact. Simple considerations like this are vital to creating trails that can handle years of heavy use.

This well-designed trail naturally follows site contours, which also makes the trail more appealing to use. Notice the trail drainage dip that drains water off the trail (to the left).

Optimal forest access route. With relatively light use, the grasses on this trail help keep it usable without restrictions, perhaps over decades of use.

While this OHM trail is in sandy, non-cohesive soil, systematic displacement on the curve has formed a superelevated curve that limits further displacement. Since the tread remains porous and the site has only gentle slopes, erosion is not a problem and trail is maintainable.
Superelevated corners can be very useful if they stay within the established treadway. However, if trail “creep” begins to occur, the trail starts to slide into an unacceptable condition.

This rolling grade trail is both fun and durable, in spite of its heavy use. Notice how the dips and crests help manage stormwater and prevent erosion.

Soil variability factors into durability. Compactible soils, such as well-graded gravel (left), are best suited for natural trails due to their inherent stability. On these soils, displacement and rutting should be minimal. On sandy soils (right), more displacement can be expected and cause somewhat deeper ruts than would be expected in other types of soils. As long as erosion, migration of soil into water bodies, excessive rutting, and by-passing are kept in check, this trail can remain usable even though the tread itself shifts a bit over time. However, trails on sandy soils generally require more monitoring and if a problem occurs it requires prompt action.

**Qualifier for evaluation criteria!**
The stated criteria are used to establish general guidelines and do not necessarily represent current conditions in Beltrami County.

**QUESTIONABLE LEVEL OF IMPACT – ACTION REQUIRED**
A trail that is improperly designed for its intended use or is irresponsibly used is susceptible to unacceptable use impacts. In general, the trail is considered questionable if one or more of the conditions are found:

- Tread is showing signs of becoming unstable, with the surface not capable of supporting the intended use (most often exhibited by significant ruts)
- Displacement of soils from the trail tread is more than desired for superelevated corners, causing concerns that trail users will start to bypass the area
- Trail is showing signs of poor drainage, with water ponding and causing standing water, mud holes and bypass routes
- Erosion is becoming an issue, with soil movement into adjacent water bodies starting to occur
- A growing potential for impacts to adjoining ecological systems (especially wetlands) is becoming evident, often due to the factors listed above
Where these signs begin to manifest themselves, action is required to forestall a worsening of the situation, which would require even more drastic action, possibly even trail closure. The following photographs illustrate questionable conditions associated with a variety of natural trails that suggest the need for action.

**Problem: Trail creep.** This low spot on a mountain bike trail is routinely wet, forcing trail users to go around it. Either a reroute or hardening with rocks or a boardwalk is necessary to avoid continued expansion of the trail.

**Problem: Soil limitations.** With sandy soils, trail creep can become an issue. If this occurrence is limited to an occasional stretch, no major action is required. But if this problem persists over a significant distance, rerouting or closure may be necessary.

**Problem: By-passing around trail protrusions.** Even a few rocks and roots in a hiking trail can entice trail users to find another route. Left unchecked, this type of activity can slowly detract from the trail experience and the natural setting. Stronger anchors (and “stay on trail” signs) are needed to keep this from getting worse.

**Problem: Lack of underlying soil stability.** Organic soils are inherently prone to rutting. Although still within rutting limits, this trail is close to becoming unstable, especially if soils begin to migrate to adjacent systems and water bodies. If foot traffic is low, periodic reseeding and filling may be the best approach. If problem continues, rerouting may be necessary.

**Problem: Erosion due to fall-line alignment.** In both of these cases, the trail follows the fall line (i.e. straight up the slope), which creates the potential for erosion to become an issue. In the left photo, erosion is becoming a problem and soil is migrating to the base of the slope. If periodic trail maintenance is done, this trail could remain reasonably stable, although a better solution is to realign it. On the right photo, erosion of this forest access route is clearly becoming an issue with increasing use and exposure to the elements. Realignment or closure of this segment will ultimately be necessary to keep this trail in an acceptable condition.
Unacceptable Level of Impact – Action Mandated

Trails reach an unacceptable impact threshold when a problem cannot be reasonably solved and/or past maintenance has not proven successful. Impacts are considered unacceptable if one or more of the conditions are found:

- Tread is not stable and does not retain a surface capable of supporting the intended use (most often exhibited by significant rutting)
- Displacement of soils from the trail tread is excessive, causing extensive berming on the outside of curves beyond that which was intended in the design of the trail
- Trail does not drain well and erosion and mudholes are occurring on an ongoing basis
- Impacts to adjoining ecological systems (especially wetlands) is caused by poor trail alignment or cross-country travel and by-passing

Important qualifier! The initial finding of an unacceptable trail condition does not have to automatically lead to closure. Instead, it should trigger a very assertive process of trying to solve the problem by working with user groups and law enforcement agencies. If that good-faith effort proves unsuccessful, then more dramatic action is indeed required (which could include trail closure) to avoid further degrading of ecological systems.

Notably, the time frame on taking action can be very short if the situation is of major concern, such as illegal cross-country travel through a wetland. In these situations, temporary closures or seasonal restrictions can also be used as a means to limit further degradation, call attention to the situation, and allow enough time to work through a process to solve the problem.
Unacceptable conditions can be caused by a single event or a collection of events that add up to a poor trail condition. Of all the factors that contribute to these conditions, illegal by-passing and cross country travel is the most likely event that will lead to trail closure due to the impact it has on adjoining ecological systems and the difficulty of resolving the problem through trail maintenance and enforcement. The following photographs illustrate unacceptable conditions associated with a variety of natural trails.

**Problem: Compacted and displaced tread in lowland area makes the tread unstable.** Attempting to drain this tread would drain the entire area, unacceptably changing the hydrology of an adjacent wetland. Rerouting or closure of the trail is mandatory.

**Problem: Severe soil erosion adjacent to hillside due to poor trail design.** This will indefinitely continue and cause increasing levels of downstream sediment. Rerouting or closure of the trail is mandatory.

**Problem: Compaction and displacement on a near-level site deepening the tread of this relatively new ATV trail.** Water ponds on the tread because it is the lowest point. As a designated trail, fixing the problem by improving drainage and perhaps hardening the tread through this section are possible solutions.

**Problem: Trail sprawl.** If seemingly minor holes and ruts are left unchecked, it is inevitable that a trail will keep expanding and/or new by-passes will be created. These problems are common in areas of organic soils and solving them is no small challenge.

**Problem: Severe, ongoing erosion on a modest slope.** Disregarding the drainage characteristics of a site almost always leads to this kind of a problem. This trail will have to be redesigned using rolling grade techniques. Otherwise, closure would ultimately be necessary as the problem gets worse.
Problem: Excessive displacement. Heavy use, erodible soils, and lack of rolling grade have combined to excessively displace soils along this trail. Rerouting and/or closure is necessary since fixing this is almost impossible.

Problem: “Social” cross-country trail follows steep tall line alignment on erodible soils. Continued erosion of this trail on sandy soils is almost assured, which will eventually cause riders to create yet another by-pass that will result in the same outcome. Unchecked cross-country travel is problematic, and efforts to curtail this activity through peer groups and enforcement are necessary if long-term access to an area is to be assured.

Problem: By-passing. Irresponsible use of this forest access route by a few reckless riders often results in access being taken away from the majority of responsible users.

Problem: By-passing. The deep rutting on the right encouraged riders to create a new route, which over time will also likely rut in these organic soils. Since this is a designated OHV trail, realigning the trail to higher and more stable ground is the best solution.

Problem: Ignoring gated areas causes damage to other trails and reinforces a poor public image. Lack of respect for closed areas only leads to increased pressure to restrict use. Peer pressure is the most successful means of instilling responsibility in trail users.

Problem: Cross-country travel through sensitive natural area, creating unacceptable impacts. Immediate closure of this trail is in order to avoid continued degradation.
If natural trail systems are being monitored on an ongoing basis, many of these unacceptable conditions can be caught at an early stage prior to more dramatic action being required. By staying abreast of changing conditions and working with user groups to solve problems, access to designated trails and forest access routes can be more assured. Lacking this commitment, it is reasonable to expect that public pressure to curtail the use of public lands for recreation will mount and ultimately result in more restricted access.

**Taking Action on Problematic Trails and Forest Access Routes**

Occasionally, trails or forest access routes will become problematic due to inadequate design, improper use, or higher than expected use levels for the given classification. Whatever the cause, action is necessary to avoid further degradation of the trail and surrounding ecological systems.

When an unacceptable impact threshold is reached, the options are limited to reclassifying, restricting use, or decommissioning the trail, as the following considers.

**Reclassifying a Trail**

If a degraded trail is found, reclassifying it to a higher or lower level trail is an option as long as the consequences are understood. If a trail classification is raised, that usually entails a higher level of design, management, and stewardship, each of which have cost implications. If a trail classification is lowered, it typically means some former use will no longer be allowed. The difficulty of either of these options underscores the importance of making sure that trails are properly classified in the first place and that if durability cannot be assured to begin with, then the viability of a trail should be closely scrutinized.

Given their potential for site impacts, OHV trails require the most planning and design diligence, followed by horseback riding, mountain biking, and hiking. In descending order, the more a trail is poorly designed or improperly used, the more probable it is that problematic conditions will occur.

For OHV uses, the most likely scenario for reclassification relates to forest access routes, which as previously defined are typically existing low maintenance or lower-level routes and old logging trails through the county that are open to general recreational use. Under this classification, these trails are made available to motorized and non-motorized activities only as long as those uses remain manageable with limited maintenance. Since this network is extensive on county land, it is unlikely that the County will ever have the capacity to go beyond very basic maintenance. As long as use levels are relatively low and users are responsible, these trails can remain open for use over long periods of time.

Should forest access routes become problematic, there are two options:

- Raising the classification level to “designated OHV trail,” which brings with it higher design and stewardship requirements that now must be adhered to if the trail is to return to a desirable condition. (Note that if a classification is changed to a higher level, the user groups must be made aware that their responsibilities to maintain and manage it will also rise.)
- Lower the classification to “hunter/walker trail,” which eliminates motorized uses and therefore greatly reduces the likelihood of further impacts.
Notably, raising the classification to a designated OHV trail should only occur if the route is needed as part of a larger OHV trail system plan. Otherwise, arbitrarily raising it without the capacity to redesign and manage the new trail only leads to more impacts and more dramatic restrictions to access later on. This same logic holds true for other types of trails as well.

**Restricting Use**

Restricting use on problematic trails or forest access routes is another option for addressing situations that have not otherwise been successfully resolved. Of all of the options, use restrictions offers the most promise in that it can be flexibly applied as warranted by a given situation. With respect to trail use, options for restricting use of trails and forest access routes include the following:

- Temporary closure to allow time to resolve the situation with user groups
- Limited restrictions on the type of use allowed on either a seasonal or specified-time basis – which relates to closing an area for a year or two to allow it to recover
- Full restrictions on a given type of use

**Decommissioning a Trail**

Decommissioning simply means closing a trail or forest access route and restoring it to some semblance of the pre-trail conditions. This approach is most applicable in situations where reclassification is not viable or a trail is relocated to another, more suitable setting. Under these circumstances, the goal is to enable nature to reclaim the site quickly and in a cost-effective way.

When a trail or forest access route is closed, at a minimum the visible ends of the old corridor should be regraded back to the original slopes, eroded soil should be replaced, and replanted with native plants, trees, and/or shrubs. Also, berming is often used at trail access points to further prevent future use.

**User Group Role in Minimizing Use Impacts**

As defined in Section 2, all user groups recognize that they must be individually and collectively responsible for stewardship of the trails they use if access is to remain relatively unrestricted. *This point cannot be overstated in that success or failure of the plan ultimately rests with the users.* In the end, resource management is the top priority and all activities, including recreation uses, must be consistent with the principle of a sustainable forest as defined by the *Forest Management Plan*. If trails and forest access routes are used responsibly and user groups follow through with their commitments, it is reasonable to expect that recreational use of county lands will remain a successful endeavor, even as overall use pressure grows.

To ensure success, the County is committed to working with user groups to educate and inform them of the proper development, management, and use of trails. The County will also rely upon the prudent use of law enforcement to address illegal use wherever it might occur. Although these commitments will help ensure success, the County can only act in support of users themselves taking the lead in managing proper use and limiting the extent to which irresponsible trail use occurs. For this “peer pressure” approach to take root, advocacy groups and the County need to work together to develop educational material and outreach programs about the importance of stewardship and the lawful use of trails and forest access routes. The County must also be clear that access is a privilege which can be restricted if problems cannot be resolved by other, more constructive means.
SECTION 4 - IMPLEMENTATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

OUTREACH AND MARKETING

Beltrami County will continue to expand its outreach effort over time to enhance public awareness of the trails plan and implementation phases. This effort consists of various components, including the following:

- **Printed Materials:** Brochures and maps, trail use regulations, etc. These will be distributed through County departments, libraries, community agencies, tourism information centers, and other contacts throughout the county.

- **Electronic Communication:** The web page is increasingly being used to inform citizens about the County’s functions and services, meetings, and planning process that are underway. In addition, the public can contact the County via e-mail.

- **Other Outreach:** Other forms of outreach and marketing include displays at the local events and fairs, the production of flyers and brochures and the display of information at County Service Centers and kiosks. The County also publishes news releases and advertisements in local community newspapers that highlight upcoming happenings. The County will also increasingly promote trail use through feature articles and presentations to other County departments and local agencies.

- **Marketing Initiatives:** The County will continue to enhance its marketing plan to increase public awareness, understanding, and use of trail facilities as they are developed or expanded. As the plan is implemented, the County will explore additional markets and related opportunities to outreach to new user groups.

ENFORCEMENT

Users of trails and forest access routes will be informed of rules and regulations in a variety of ways. On designated trails, kiosks and signs will be strategically located to provide specific information about allowable trail uses, permitted and prohibited activities, fees, and directions. The Beltrami County Sheriff’s Department responds to emergencies and criminal complaints.

To further this cause, the expectations and responsibilities of the user groups should be clearly defined as part of all trail implementation strategies. Hands-on programs should also be used as a means to ensure a common understanding of the issues and expectations. As an example, this could include field workshops to more clearly define “Impact Thresholds” in real terms and how trail advocates and the County can work together to identify problems early on and aggressively address impacts before they become a real concern.
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