

Wisconsin Association of Lakes

A nonprofit group of citizens, organizations, and businesses working for clean, safe, healthy lakes for everyone.

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To: Members of the Natural Resources Board:

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The Wisconsin Association of Lakes (WAL) would like to add its voice to the many Wisconsin residents and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources officials who have written to the Wisconsin Natural Resource Board (NRB) asking that the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest (NHAL) be protected from the impact of Off Highway Vehicles (OHV). WAL is a statewide, nonprofit group of citizens, organizations and businesses representing over 100,000 members who together work to protect and enhance the quality of Wisconsin's 15,000 lakes. WAL is especially concerned about the 60 miles of all-terrain vehicle (ATV) trails proposed by the Stakeholder group that was authorized by the NRB, as a directive of the 2005 NHAL State Forest Master Plan, to explore the possibility of ATV trails.

The Northern Highland American Legion State Forest purifies water for over 900 glacial lakes and feeds the headwater streams of three major rivers - the Wisconsin, the Manitowish, and the North Fork of the Flambeau. When the many wetlands and bogs are added to this inventory, greater than one-third of the forest is water, making the NHAL State Forest the largest and most unique watershed in Wisconsin and, for that matter, the nation. WAL recognizes that surface waters with their connection to groundwater provide important aquatic links that support the integrity of ecosystems throughout the watershed. This magnificent resource protects some of the highest quality, unspoiled lakes and streams remaining in the state. Most importantly, these waters belong to **all** Wisconsin residents. WAL feels that this heritage must be preserved now and for many generations.

The proposed ATV trails go directly through the heart of three major Macrosites: the Central Highland Macrosite, Star Lake Crescent Macrosite and Lower Manitowish River Macrosite.

These Macrosites have been designated by DNR scientists, in the *October 1999 Biotic Inventory and Analysis of the NHALSF*, as representing the most significant and functional natural communities remaining in the state. As such they provide essential habitat for native plants and animals, migrant species and many rare and endangered species. Scientists have given these sites “strong protective designation”.

The ATV trails threaten the Lower Manitowish River Macrosite with a proposed bridge that will connect the trail, across the Manitowish River, to Sandy Beach Road, a road that is lined by a rare, highly protected, wetland complex that leads to the undeveloped shore of Sandy Beach Lake. The Manitowish River has a very high ranking in the Northern Rivers Initiative - number 5 out of 301 segments in the Upper Chippewa Basin. This high ranking indicates that the Manitowish River is a high quality water body with intact ecosystems along its banks. As the Manitowish flows into the Manitowish River Wilderness Area, the combined miles of river bank act as a major wildlife corridor and flyway. The 300-foot scenic corridor designated along both riverbanks of the Lower Manitowish, offers exceptional beauty and diverse nature study to many who canoe and kayak this stretch. Bridges for ATVs will breach this corridor on two separate points - one constructed at the Hwy 51 wayside and the other existing on Hwy 47 and 51.

The proposed ATV trail involves excessive wetland and river crossings in all three Macrosites mentioned above. In Iron County there are 5 wetland crossings plus 2 across the Manitowish River. On the Oneida/Vilas trail there are 5 proposed wetland crossings including Plum Creek, a trout breeding stream. Most of these wetland complexes are rich in diverse and endangered wildlife and “highly protected”.

At risk from OHV damage are undeveloped lakeshores, wild lakes located in State Natural Areas, and extensive wetlands. It is estimated that 75% of the NHAL’s rare plants and animals are dependent on these wetlands. Such native ecosystems are the first line of defense against invasive species, both aquatic and terrestrial. OHVs carry seeds and plants in their tire treads and together with the habitat damage they cause, they will lower the resistance of the land and water to foreign invasives.

WAL is also concerned about enforcement. WAL has learned that at the May 14th Stakeholders meeting statements were made by an NHAL forest manager and a Vilas County Board Supervisor, that insufficient funds would prevent patrolling of the OHV trail by both State Forest Rangers and the County Sheriff’s Department. This creates 60 miles of proposed OHV trails, through some of the most sensitive areas in the state forest, with no legal trail enforcement.

WAL feels that this unique watershed, attracting 2.2 million yearly visitors to the NHAL, supports the ecosystem health and economy of the communities and people who live in the Northwoods. Most of these people come to the NHAL to escape the motorized frenzy of the cities and to enjoy the natural and real sounds, smells, and sights of nature.

According to the Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, Kelli Trumble, there is a growing “green” trend across the country that draws tourists to Wisconsin and the NHAL, a treasure that belongs to all Wisconsin citizens. A critical component of this emerging trend is the

Wisconsin tradition of conservation and enlightened stewardship of its natural resources. Clear lakes and undamaged shorelines increase in value as they become more rare.

The only way to save this special, water rich forest, with all its accompanying natural functions, is to reduce all activities that threaten to degrade the land and water, to impact on critical habitat or to intrude upon the tranquility and enjoyment of these lands.

Please ask yourself what is best for the land and water. Please ask yourself what sort of respect for nature we desire to teach our children and to gift them with now and beyond.

Surely the pleasure of the few who desire more ATV trails is not worth compromising the value our one-of-a-kind Northern Highland American Legion State Forest.

Sincerely,

s/s Peter T. Murray
Executive Director

CC: Mr. Scott Hassett, Secretary
Mr. Paul DeLong, Division of Forestry
Mr. Dave Phillips, Governor's State Trails Council
WAL Board of Directors