

River Alliance of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin

March 12, 2007

Dear Natural Resources Board Members:

We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the ATV trail proposal developed by a stakeholders group for the Northern Highland American Legion State Forest. These comments are on behalf of the River Alliance of Wisconsin. We are a non-profit, non-partisan organization representing over 3,000 members and 160 local watershed groups from throughout the state, and our purpose is to restore and protect Wisconsin's rivers for all.

According to a DNR publication entitled, *Wisconsin State Forests*, when the NHAL State Forest was established in 1925, one of its major goals was to protect the headwaters of three important northern rivers - the Wisconsin, the Manitowish and the North Fork of the Flambeau.

Today the forest is a showcase of good forest management, healthy and pristine rivers, lakes and wetlands, and a haven for northern residents and the many tourists who enjoy a true northwoods experience in the forest every year.

Now you have the responsibility of determining whether recreational ATV use is appropriate in the NHAL, and if so, whether the proposed ATV routes are compatible with other uses, will not degrade the resources the forest has protected all these years, and fit well within a statewide master plan for recreational ATV trails.

One way to consider these questions is by looking at one of the major loops being proposed. The plan calls for building a recreational bridge across the lower Manitowish River at a public wayside on Highway 51 south of Manitowish Waters.

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 river has some of the highest water quality and supports one of the healthiest aquatic ecosystems of all northern rivers. Further, it has been designated as an Exceptional Resource Water. While this doesn't prohibit ATV crossings, it's fair to say that an ATV crossing has the ability to degrade that designation.

It's widely accepted that many ATV riders enjoy riding because the vehicles are fun to drive through water and mud. A visit to any northern location where ATVs are allowed proves time and again that ATV users are just as likely to by-pass bridges in favor of driving through water bodies and wetlands. Sadly, there are plenty of lasting examples of this throughout the northwoods - because the damage done is slow to heal, and indeed, often attracts more damage.

The Manitowish is highly prized by paddlers, anglers, and wildlife enthusiasts as one of the north's premier water trails. It offers unequalled natural and cultural history opportunities, along

with a wilderness-like experience - even where it flows close to the highway. ATV use is not compatible with these other recreational uses.

It's not only other recreational forest users that come into conflict with recreational ATV use. As the River Alliance's Northern Rivers Advocate, a 20-year resident of rural Vilas County, and a member of the Statewide Best Forest Management Practices Advisory Team, I can attest that recreational ATV users are increasingly degrading logging roads, at great cost to the forest products industry. As you know, logging roads are costly to build and maintain, and frustration is building within the logging community as they are forced to halt operations to repair road and culvert damage caused by ATV users.

So, while the stakeholder's group made every effort to select routes on existing town and logging roads and snowmobile trails to avoid the need to create additional trails, the potential for conflict on existing travel corridors is apparent.

Reports on the actual miles of existing recreational ATV trails in Wisconsin vary greatly - from 3,000 to over 8,000 miles, depending on the source. But any way you look at it, there are thousands of miles of trails available for this use already. Yet there is no comprehensive state-wide plan to determine how existing trails might best be connected with the least amount of natural resource degradation.

Finally, the Department of Natural Resources continually cites a lack of funding and staff to carry out important conservation initiatives in Wisconsin. Building, maintaining and enforcing laws on ATV trails will require additional funding and law enforcement staff. Has the stakeholders group planned for that? Where will the additional funds come from?

We urge the Natural Resources Board to postpone or suspend ATV trail development on the NHAL State Forest until a statewide ATV trail plan is developed. It's time for a broad-scale look at this issue.

The Northern Highland American Legion State Forest is a very special place. Which do we need more ATV trails or special places? In this case, we can't have both.

Sincerely,

Gail Gilson Pierce
Northern Rivers Advocate