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## **CROW WING COUNTY**

**BRAINERD, MINNESOTA 56401**

### **The Importance of Managing Recreation** **Katie Fernholz** **Kirk Titus**

Late last year, the Crow Wing County Land Services Department initiated a project to develop a Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan. As a necessary first step in the development of this plan, County Natural Resource Managers are currently conducting a “high conservation value forest assessment”.

This assessment is a requirement of the county’s forest certification program and will serve as a foundation for the recreation trails plan. Special pristine natural forest areas on county lands are identified, managed and monitored so these high conservation values are maintained for the future. Crow Wing County’s 103,000 acres of tax forfeit forestlands became third party certified to the SFI (Sustainable Forestry Initiative) and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) forest certification standards in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

These planning and assessment efforts are a reflection of the evolving nature of land services management. One of the areas of change that land managers have to respond to is recreation.

Whereas in years past, a forester may spend their day primarily planning timber harvests and working with loggers, these days foresters and other natural resource professionals are engaged in a greater range of activities necessary to deliver a full range of forest benefits and services. Land managers are answering the call to provide forest products, revenues for local communities and schools, protection for water quality, prevention of soil erosion, wildlife habitats, scenic beauty, hunting and fishing opportunities, and trail-based recreation. In 2009, timber sales on County managed lands generated a surplus of \$360,000.00, 30 percent of which – \$108,000 – will be distributed to Townships, Cities and School Districts in the County to offset local tax levies.

And within the realm of recreation trails, demands have diversified. In years past, hiking and hunter walking trails may have sufficed, but then came snowmobiles, and now we have dog-sledding, cross-country skiing, dirt bikes, horse trails, ATVs, geo-caching and more. Given the abundant waterways and lakes in Crow Wing County, there are also public expectations for canoe and kayak routes, fishing accesses and well maintained boat launches. With all of this on our plate, it begs the question – why would anyone want to be a land manager, and how can any county be expected to plan for all of this?

The bottom line is this diversity of opportunities is exactly what land managers and foresters are trained to handle. We are trained to understand, consider, address, protect and manage a full range of trade-offs and opportunities that our forested resources offer to society. This is our number one job. Developing an effective plan to accomplish this is one of our main tools.

Paid for through funds exclusively generated by timber and land sales, the Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan and HCVF Assessment process aims to ensure that Crow Wing County is able to meet and manage recreation opportunities while maintaining the other forest benefits and services that residents and visitors value.

Research by the MN DNR shows that recreation in the Crow Wing County region is expected to increase strongly in the coming years (insert image). Crow Wing County, like other counties in Minnesota, is facing the challenge of trying to stay ahead of the curve with the emerging recreation demands. This project is part of ensuring that the county has the tools necessary to proactively manage recreation and a plan in place to help communicate with stakeholders and citizens and meet expectations for maintaining quality of life. Some of the key strategies in this process include a diverse advisory group, open public meetings, public input processes, and transparent plan drafting and public review. The Land Services Department will be developing additional tools and partnerships to support trail monitoring and enforcement of rules, regulations and ordinances related to trail use.

There is no doubt that recreation demands will continue to grow and change over time. The best way to manage change and minimize any negative impacts is to have a good plan.

*- Kathryn (Katie) Fernholz is Executive Director of Dovetail Partners and an SAF Certified Forester. Katie is assisting the county with development of the Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan.*

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