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Rec Area Plan Criticized for High-Impact Activities

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In a plan that pits conservationists against recreation enthusiasts, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources released its most recent draft recommendation for the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area's future Nov. 8.

While some local conservationists say they support a majority of the proposal, several high-impact activities that caused controversy when first suggested remain part of the 228-page plan.

"We originally commented that the report – for the most part – was very good," said Sauk Prairie Conservation Alliance Executive Director Charlie Luthin. "In fact, a fairly large portion of it is excellent. But there are caveats."

The caveats pointed to by conservationists are activities that would be permitted on the DNR's portion of the land, which includes about 3,400 acres of the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant. The Ho-Chunk Nation owns 1,600 acres and Dairy Forage Research Center owns another 2,100 acres.

"Rocketry, dog training/trialing and off-road motorcycles are still included in the plan," Luthin said.

His organization believes such activities are anathema to agreements made by the DNR regarding use of the property before it was transferred and run afoul of the public's wishes made known during a previous comment period. He also said too much time has been allotted for hunting, which runs from October through mid-May.

"If you want to be out there in the grassland having a pleasant, quiet experience, you aren't going to get that with guns going off," Luthin said. "That noise will carry a great distance."

He said in addition to noise from hunting, blank rounds are fired during dog training and trialing.

"You are out there with your family and suddenly you hear this gunshot," Luthin said. "What are you going to do? Probably pack up your family and leave."

DNR Southwest District Parks and Recreation Supervisor Paul Zajackowski said the property is large enough that it can support many different types of activities without major conflicts.

"All activities outlined in the plan have received some support," he said.

"The department believes that the collection of recreation opportunities proposed for SPSRA, and the parameters by which they can occur, meets the objective of using the property for low impact recreation..." the plan states. "Both rocketry and motorcycle riding were brought up by the public during the initial stages of the planning process as recreation opportunities that the department should consider providing at SPSRA."

U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center Director Mark Boggess said his organization will cooperate with the DNR's planned restoration activities.

"From that aspect, we like the plan a lot," he said. "With respect we have a difference of opinion with some aspects of the plan. I'm sure the DNR worked hard in finding compromise with all the stakeholders involved."

Another conservation group has raised concern over some proposed activities.

"While we support the DNR's proposals for ecological restoration, habitat management and quiet nature-based recreation on the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant lands, we do not support proposed dual sport motorcycles and rocketry," said Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger Executive Director Laura Olah.

She said those uses contradict the goals and are not "compatible with other sustainable recreational activities proposed for Badger."

Olah said the property represents an opportunity to maintain and reestablish the biological richness of the state's disappearing native prairies and grassland birds.

Luthin said that can't happen if motorbikes are tearing up trails and scaring birds and families away.

"Anyone out there is going to have a bad experience," Luthin said. "It creates an exclusive use to the detriment of the majority of the users."

Anyone interested in speaking either for or against the plan can do so by registering with the DNR by 11 a.m. on Dec. 9. To do so, visit dnr.wi.gov/about/nrb/public.html.
