



Joe Unger
DNR Parks and Trails Division Planner
500 Lafayette Road
St. Paul MN 55155

December 3, 2018

RE: Comments on Hayes Lake State Park/Beltrami Island State Forest Camping Opportunities

Dear Mr. Unger and DNR Planning Team:

Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota is aware that the DNR has come under increased pressure to develop new camping facilities for Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) users in northern Minnesota and appreciates the opportunity to add our comments to the public record regarding the six locations currently under consideration. We know the DNR has a difficult job balancing competing interests while complying with a variety of rules and laws, and we are thankful for the work you do as stewards of Minnesota's Great Outdoors.

We are surprised the DNR is still considering OHV camping facilities in Hayes Lake State Park despite the fact that legislation to introduce OHVs to that park has been unsuccessful, and we feel compelled to reiterate the concerns we have raised each and every time the DNR has considered opening up state parks to OHVs. We are especially disappointed that the DNR continues to contemplate ways of opening up individual state parks to OHVs through local planning efforts when the Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Act prohibits it and state park visitor surveys overwhelmingly oppose it.

Because allowing OHVs in Hayes Lake State Park ultimately impacts all state parks, our comments will focus on the big picture implications of dismantling state parks by re-designating them to lower protective status simply to accommodate a higher-impact user group. To be clear, we are not opposed to OHVs or the people who use them. Our opposition is about ensuring that outdoor activities are compatible with the recreation unit in which the activity is taking place. Our outdoor recreation system has been carefully crafted over many decades so that we have distinct units that protect different types of resources and permit user activities that are compatible with those units. We appreciate all user groups who are working to get more people outdoors.

OUR CONCERNS

I. Inclusive process – As the DNR seeks to improve camping facilities for OHV users in one part of the state, we recommend using a more inclusive process that solicits feedback from all constituents who would be impacted by this decision, not simply those who would benefit. Whether this was your intention or simply a lack of oversight in the outreach efforts, by stating in your questionnaire and press releases that these engagement efforts seek to learn “the wants and desires of *campers with off-highway vehicles* in and around Hayes Lake State Park,” and framing many of the questions with the assumption that the respondent uses OHVs, you have implied that you do not seek to know the wants and desires of state park users who do not use OHVs. By limiting feedback and testimony only to this subset of people, the DNR will miss out on an important opportunity to hear from state park campers, passport and hiking club members, equestrian and mountain bike trail users, and general visitors – the groups that would be most impacted if the DNR develops OHV camping facilities and corresponding access routes at Hayes



Lake State Park. We encourage the DNR to create a similar questionnaire for the people who have made camping reservations at Hayes Lake and other state parks to make sure their voices are represented, especially considering that one of the locations being considered for OHV camping is the current Hayes Lake State Park campground. At the very least we encourage the DNR to consider data from its own state park visitor surveys, which have consistently shown that visitors overwhelmingly oppose OHVs in state parks even when limited to campgrounds. This is a critical piece of information from a key stakeholder that should not be ignored.

II. Conflicts with the Outdoor Recreation Act – The Minnesota Outdoor Recreation Act is the bedrock law upon which our state’s renowned outdoor recreation system is built, and we don’t see any interpretation of that law that warrants the relaxation of rules prohibiting OHVs in state parks. The law is clear that state parks “shall not be designed to accommodate all forms of unlimited volumes of recreational use” and that only recreation activities that “utilize the natural features of the park that can be accommodated without material disturbance of the natural features of the park or the introduction of undue artificiality into the natural scene may be permitted.” Hayes Lake State Park was thoughtfully designated as a state park because it fit the criteria. While the reclassification of outdoor recreation units is sometimes warranted, such decisions should be the result of a thoughtful process. If, the DNR believes Hayes Lake State Park was a misapplication of the designation, either wholly or in parts of the park, then a thoughtful process for assessing this designation would be appropriate. Such a change should not simply be a reaction to accommodate a specific user group’s desires.

III. The slippery slope of reclassifying outdoor recreation units – If Hayes Lake State Park is reclassified simply on the basis of one user-group’s current desires, it would set a precedent that could impact the entire state park system, with far-reaching implications beyond just this current situation. In fact, legislation was unsuccessfully sought to open up Hayes Lake State Park to OHVs as a pilot project that could be implemented elsewhere. We are aware of active efforts to open up several state parks to OHVs, including: Bear Head Lake, Lake Vermilion-Soudan Underground Mine and McCarthy Beach state parks. We can only imagine that OHV users are not the only high-impact user group who have a desire to recreate in state parks – or other more prohibitive outdoor recreation units for that matter – but if a powerful desire is the only requirement for changing our state park designations, then the future of our state parks will be very different than the current system. Now, more than ever, with so many parks under consideration for OHV use, reclassification of state park units needs to be viewed from a systematic, statewide perspective rather than in isolation.

IV. Perpetuates disproportionate use of resources – As an organization dedicated to the protection of parks for the public’s use and benefit, we understand that limited resources within state park boundaries must be managed in such manner that provides equity and balance among the sometimes-conflicting needs of user groups. State Parks occupy less than half of one percent (0.42%) of the state’s total land area. While small in footprint, these places represent a significant investment made on behalf of past, present and future generations to protect “unspoiled natural resources.” There is nearly 1,800 percent more state land available for OHVs compared to the amount of land available to state park users. This disparity exists despite the fact that only five percent of Minnesotans own an OHV compared to the 30 percent who visit state parks. By reclassifying all of Hayes Lake State Park, or a section within it, you are repurposing land from the smaller and more heavily used units to the larger more lightly used units. Given the extensive OHV trail systems in Beltrami Island State Forest that are already connected to the two potential OHV camping sites located outside Hayes Lake State Park – there are 238 miles of OHV trails in Beltrami Island State Forest – they are the most logical site for new OHV camping facilities. In fact, there are already nearly 4 million acres of state land open to OHV use, so additional expansion should not come at the expense of the meager 214,252 acres of state park land that is already facing major budget deficits. Finally, knowing that state parks contribute to strong and sustainable economies and communities, we encourage the DNR to consider studies on OHV impacts on wetlands and other sensitive natural areas that are identified in Hayes Lake State Park and protected in all state parks as well as studies on OHV noise impacts before contemplating this change.

Thanks for giving us an opportunity to share our feedback.

Sincerely,



Brett Feldman
Executive Director