

Verona State Game Area Master Plan



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Michigan Department of Natural Resources

[Michigan DNR Website](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr)

Wildlife Division

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STRATEGIC PLAN

When setting the desired future conditions, it is necessary to consider the purpose for which the property was acquired by the state, current land cover conditions, and future social and economic forces that could influence management strategies. The intended purpose for the Verona SGA was and still is the maintenance of upland grassland and lowland hardwood forest habitats for optimum numbers of pheasants, wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, cotton-tailed rabbits, ruffed grouse and woodcock. The purpose of this plan is to detail a more strategic approach to managing these species and their habitats at Verona SGA.

The Verona SGA Master Plan was developed in conjunction with and is consistent with goals and objectives for SGA's and Wildlife Areas identified in the Southeast Michigan Regional Wildlife Area Management Plan. It also supports goals and objectives in the Michigan Wildlife Action plan.

The Verona State Game Area is located in the central portion of Huron County at the tip of the "thumb" of Michigan (see Appendix 1). The game area is located approximately six miles east-southeast of Bad Axe and three miles northeast of Ubyly. Much of the surrounding landscape is dominated by row crop agriculture with small woodlots scattered among the agricultural lands on less productive soils. These small woodlots are generally dominated by a mix of aspen, red maple, ash, cottonwood and elm. Soils on the Verona SGA are generally well drained loams and clay loams in the uplands and poorly drained mucks in lowlands. Topography in the uplands ranges from relatively level on the east end of the game area to rolling in the central and western portions. Just over half of the non-forested acreage has been planted to mixes of warm and cool season grasses, another third is dedicated to row crop agriculture and has been strategically dispersed among grass plantings (See Appendix 1 for a detailed non-forested cover type analysis). Slightly more than 40% of the total acreage of the Verona SGA is forested. Many of the forested areas extend onto adjacent private lands to the north, west, northeast and southeast of the game area forming a relatively large forested complex unusual in this part of Huron County. Most of the forested acreage on the game area is confined to the relatively level, poorly drained lowlands in the western, central, southern and eastern portions of the game area. Forest types here are typical lowland deciduous species such as silver maple, red maple, green ash and elm with scattered pockets of aspen, birch, sugar maple basswood, beech and hemlock along the upland margins. Appendix 2 provides a detailed description of forest cover types derived from Michigan Forest Inventory (MiFI) data for Verona SGA.

The Verona State Game Area was purchased in 1987 from the Detroit Edison Utility Company. Detroit Edison originally purchased the land in the early 1970's as a site for a nuclear power generation facility. Changes in electrical demand

and other market considerations led Detroit Edison to declare the site as surplus property. Once declared surplus, Detroit Edison nominated the site for purchase by the state of Michigan via the Michigan Recreational Land Trust Fund in April, 1985. Ultimately MDNR – Wildlife Division was offered and accepted these lands to form a new State Game Area. Final approval for purchase was granted by the Natural Resources Commission in 1986 and on March 19, 1987, 6,852 acres was deeded to the State of Michigan forming the Verona State Game Area. Since that time another 843 acres has been added through direct purchase bringing the total acreage to 7,512 acres (see Appendix 1).

What follows is the strategic direction for Verona SGA. This plan describes the **goals** or desired future condition for the area, the **objectives** under each goal, and the **actions** associated with each objective. For the purposes of this master plan, the following definitions will be used:

Goal – A desired future condition of the area.

Objective – A management approach or strategy that the best science suggests can be used to move the area toward the Goal. An objective is a quantifiable input to be completed within a defined timeframe that contributes towards accomplishing the goal.

Action – An operational means to accomplish an objective. An action is a step needed to complete an objective and is described in sufficient detail to inform planning. An action is a quantifiable input to be completed within a defined timeframe that contributes towards accomplishing the objective.

It is expected to take approximately ten years to complete all the objectives.

Desired Future Conditions

Goal I Maintain forested and non-forested habitats for optimum numbers of ring-necked pheasants, white-tailed deer, cotton-tailed rabbits, wild turkeys, ruffed grouse and woodcock to provide quality hunting experiences.

Rationale: 1) This area was dedicated to provide hunting recreation for Michigan citizens; 2) each of the species listed above are listed as Featured Species; 3) one of the DNR's priorities is to reverse the trending loss of hunters and trappers, this goal will help ensure hunting opportunity remains in Huron County; 4) one of the objectives in the Wildlife Division's GPS is related to small game hunting opportunity; 5) there are good populations of all six species on the SGA; 6) this goal address the following strategies in the GPS: 1.1.5, 1.1.7, 2.1.1-4, 4.3.3, 4.3.4; 7).

Assessment: 1) direct observation by WLD staff and conversations with hunters and users on the SGA will be used to assess success of this goal; 2) annual review of work plan compared to activities completed as described below.

Objective A: Maintain and update forest and non-forested inventory, create habitat treatments and track habitat treatments utilizing Michigan Forest Inventory data.

Action 1. Assign areas of interest, create and track habitat treatments for the next 10 years.

Objective B: Initiate treatments designed to create and/or improve pheasant habitat on a minimum of 200 acres annually.

Action 1. Work with MDNR-FRD to design a prescribed fire rotation at this location that will treat a third of grassland acreage (approximately 1000 acres) once every 3-4 years.

Action 2. Continue to apply grassland management techniques such as haying and disking in existing stands and continually seek to plant new grasslands in existing croplands.

Action 3. Use current and future sharecropping contract language to apply grassland habitat improvement techniques such as planting, disking, herbicide treatment, mowing and haying.

Action 4. Work with existing sharecroppers to reduce acreage under annual sharecropping contracts by at least one third in order to expand acreage in permanent grassland cover.

Action 5. Create and/or maintain early successional forest and brush along margins of grasslands to provide quality pheasant wintering habitat.

Action 6. Monitor the invasion of woody vegetation in grasslands and apply appropriate treatments such as spot spraying and mowing to check their spread.

Objective C: Initiate forest treatments on lowland hardwood and mixed upland hardwood types on a minimum of 30 acres annually.

Action 1. Use current forest inventory to identify lowland and upland hardwood stands suitable for harvest.

Action 2. Use appropriate silvicultural prescriptions and harvest specifications on lowland types to ensure their long-term persistence on the landscape.

Action 3. Use current forest inventory to identify mixed upland hardwood sites with a minimum of 20% aspen

canopy cover (or 30 sq. ft. BA) for possible conversion to aspen types.

Action 4. Establish rotation age of 50 years for aspen cover types to ensure even age class distribution where it occurs. Ideally, four aspen age classes of 0-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-40 and 41+ would be within ¼ mile of each where sufficient aspen acreage is present.

Action 5. Continue to use harvest specifications that require the retention of coarse woody debris in general with particular emphasis on the creation of brush piles adjacent to grassland and cropland. Those specifications with particular emphasis on snags, drumming logs and legacy tree retention will be utilized where appropriate.

Goal II Maintain boundary integrity and infrastructure in a manner that is consistent with Goal I and associated objectives.

Rationale: 1) the area provides recreational opportunities related to wildlife; 2) the DNR Wildlife Division supports consumptive and non-consumptive wildlife related recreational activities that promote our state's wildlife heritage; 3) sufficient parking lots, work roads, gates and signs are required for users to take advantage of recreational opportunities; this goal addresses the following strategies in the GPS: 3.2.3, 4.3.4, 4.5.2, 6.1.2, 9.3.1.

Assessment: Discussions with users and observations of use.

Objective A: Maintain 40 parking areas for appropriate numbers of users.

Action 1. Perform monthly inspection of parking areas

Action 2. Maintain access to parking areas with annual grading and trash removal as needed.

Objective B: Maintain boundary signage and maps that identify SGA boundaries and rules.

Action 1. Perform monthly inspection of signage.

Action 2. Ensure SGA maps are updated and available.

Action 3. Resolve trespass issues through the trespass resolution process.

Objective C: Maintain 3 gates and other vehicle barriers to prevent unauthorized motorized vehicle access.

Action 1. Perform monthly inspection of gates and vehicle barriers.

Action 2. Identify and close sites of unauthorized access.

Objective D: Maintain 3 miles of work roads to provide access to the interior of the area for habitat management activities.

Action 1. Perform semi-annual inspection of all work roads and trails.

Action 2. Based upon inspections; address maintenance needs through grading, mowing and brush removal.

Recreational and Commercial Uses

Recreational and commercial uses on the area that are not incidental to our management for the purposes described above are generally not allowed. These uses can be allowed, however, under the following circumstances:

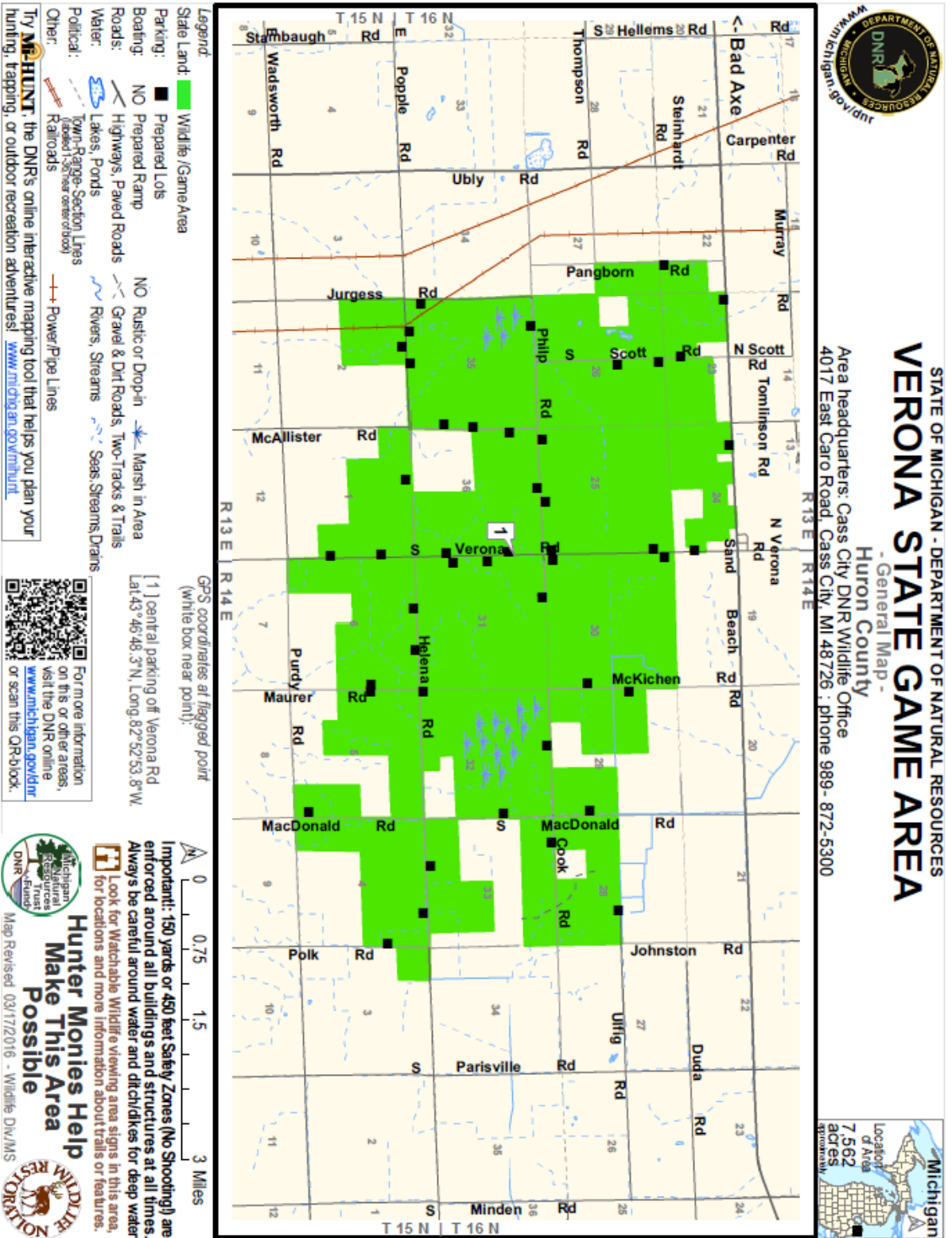
1. The uses must not interfere or conflict with the wildlife conservation purposes of the area described above.
2. The DNR has no obligations to determine if requested uses would conflict or interfere; the burden of determining must remain with those requesting the uses.
3. The requested uses cannot be exclusive of other allowable uses and must not result in the DNR losing management control of any portion of the area.
4. A lack of a specific prohibition in rules and regulations for the area does not constitute approval of the activity.
5. The DNR always reserves the ability to disallow activities previously allowed as wildlife conservation needs dictate.

Commercial uses on the Verona SGA include row crop agriculture and timber harvest. Row crop agriculture is conducted on a sharecrop basis by local farmers and is a valuable tool to achieve habitat objectives for grasslands and food plots. Commercial timber harvests are utilized to achieve forest habitat management objectives. The DNR will continue to monitor existing commercial and recreational uses for interference with the intended purposes of the area as described in this plan.

Acquisition and Disposal of Land

Acquisition priorities will focus on those parcels that provide the best wildlife habitat management potential, consolidate state ownership within a section, reduce boundary posting and eliminate boundary trespass and encroachment issues. Each parcel that becomes available and is considered for acquisition will be evaluated using these criteria.

Appendix 1: Verona SGA Map



Appendix 2

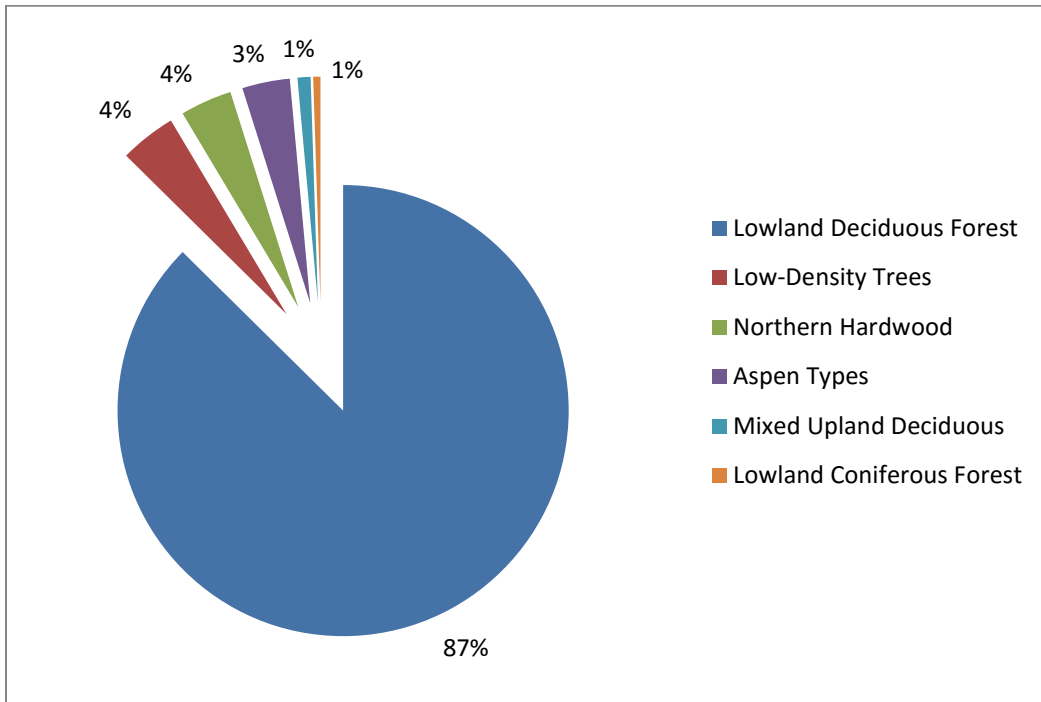


Figure 1: Verona SGA forested cover type analysis based on Michigan Forest Inventory data. Total forested acreage = 3,123 acres.

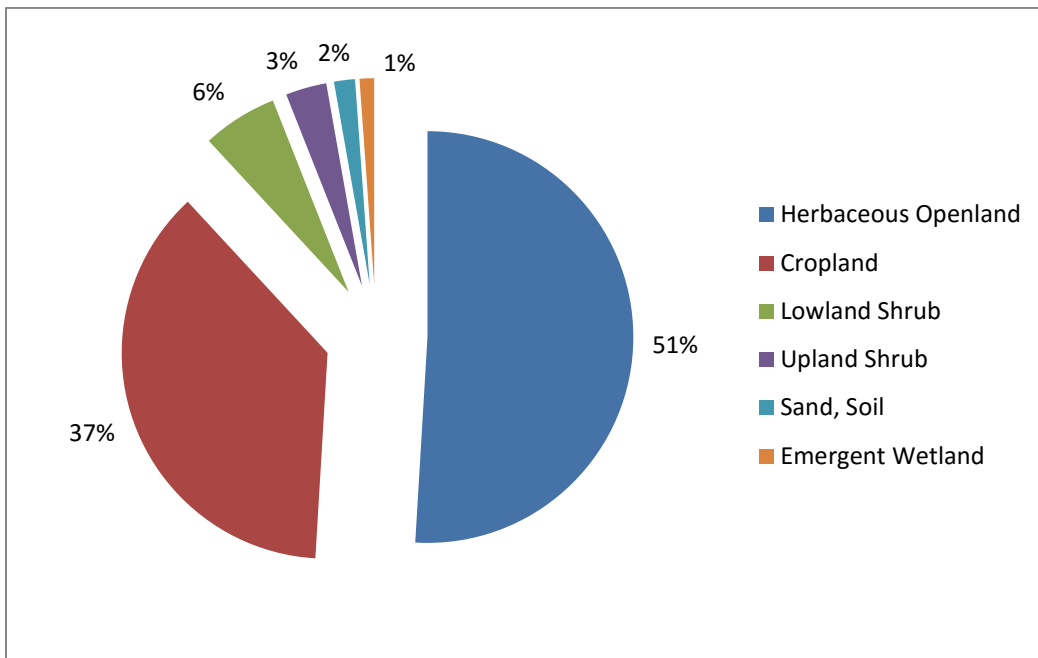
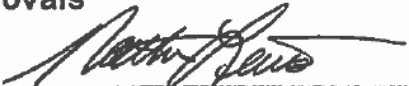
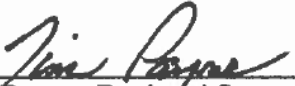


Figure 2: Verona SGA non-forested cover type analysis based on Michigan Forest Inventory Data. Total non-forested acreage = 4,389 acres

Public Input

This plan was available for public review and comment on the [Michigan DNR website](#) between March 14, 2016 and April 25, 2016. During this period 1 comment was received and considered before finalizing this plan.

Approvals

 _____	<i>7/8/16</i> _____
Nate Levitte, Field Operations Manager	Date
 _____	<i>7-13-16</i> _____
Tim Payne, Regional Supervisor	Date