

Michigan Department of Natural Resources Managed Public Land Strategy Proposed Updated Plan 1994 Public Act 451, Section 503(10)

Public Act 451 of 1994, Section 503(10) requires the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to provide a report to the Legislature on the progress toward the goals, proposed changes to the goals, and the department's collaboration with local units of government in the implementation and update of the strategic plan entitled "Department of Natural Resources Managed Public Land Strategy".

Land ownership & transactions

Since 2013, the department's total land ownership acreage has remained relatively constant at just under 4.6 million acres, of which Forest Resources Division manages 3.9 million acres, Parks and Recreation Division manages 357,000 acres and Wildlife Division takes care of 364,000 acres.

From 2013 through fiscal year 2020, total land transactions included:

- Purchases of 17,700 acres for \$86.3 million.
- Land sales of 18,700 acres for \$19.25 million.
- Exchanges involving acquisition of 9,300 acres and disposals of 10,400 acres.
- Gifts of land totaling 3,100 acres.
- Public use deeds conveyed to local governments totaling 1,600 acres.
- Grants of 325 public utility and private access easements valued at \$2.3 million.

Progress on land strategy goals

With the enactment of Public Act 240 of 2018, the Legislature approved the implementation of the strategy dated July 1, 2013. The strategy's three primary goals and the progress toward accomplishing those goals are as follows:

Goal 1: Provide quality outdoor recreation opportunities

Citizen satisfaction with the quality of recreational opportunities increased from 79% to 84% from 2012 to 2018 according to the Michigan Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) survey. Key components of the strategy included increasing access to state lands and to a variety of trail types.

A. Increase access to land

- The forest road inventory and mapping of roads that are open to ORVs has been completed and is available on the department's website, Michigan.gov/ForestRoads.
- State game and wildlife areas acreage south of the Mason-Arenac line increased from 303,000 to 310,800, while state parks and recreation area land increased from 129,400 to 133,100 acres.
- Highlights of strategic investment in the consolidation of existing DNR-managed lands that improved public access, mitigated hunting safety zones, and increased management efficiencies included:
 - Petersburg State Game Area – Monroe County (73 acres)

- Barry State Game Area – Barry County (355 acres)
- Holly State Recreation Area – Oakland County (290 Acres)
- Unadilla State Waterfowl Area – Livingston County (200 acres)
- Expansion of DNR service acquisitions that provided new public hunting opportunities in southern Michigan included:
 - Potterville State Game Area – Eaton County (444 acres)
 - Cornish State Game Area – Van Buren County (485 acres)
 - Watkins Lake State Park and County Preserve – Jackson County (746 acres)
 - Crystal Waters State Game Area – Monroe County (680 acres, purchase expected to be completed in summer 2021)
- The department made progress in establishing or improving state parks in urban areas including:
 - Management of Belle Isle Park under a lease agreement with the city of Detroit in 2014, including investing \$75.8 million in the park over the last six years.
 - New urban park acquisitions in the 106-acre Holly Oaks ORV Park in Oakland County.
 - Acquisition of the 334-acre Racer Trust (former General Motors facility) property in Saginaw.
 - Partnership with the city of Portage for an urban state game area.

B. Increase access to surface water and water trails.

- With partnerships, the department has:
 - Completed, or is in the process of finalizing, 45 acquisition projects encompassing 2,550 acres with over 6.6 miles on the Great Lakes, inland lakes, rivers and streams. The total investment is \$53 million.
 - Funded 88 development projects with a total investment of \$74 million.
 - Continued progress on achieving public access on 29% of lakes under 100 acres.
 - Administered, along with the Waterways Commission, the Harbor Program consisting of 83 safe harbors along the Great Lakes.
 - Designated 3,000 miles of trails on the Great Lakes, inland lakes and rivers (found at Michigan.gov/WaterTrails).
 - Established eight state-designated water trails, totaling 540 miles, in the southern Lower Peninsula and in the Chain of Lakes in Antrim and Kalkaska counties.

C. Increase access to trails.

- Presently there are over 13,000 miles of state-designated motorized and nonmotorized trails in Michigan. An interconnected system of multiuse trails is located within 5 miles of 76% of Michigan citizens. Since 2013, trail access increases include:
 - One hundred new miles (now 650 total miles) of Great Lake-to-Lake linear trails on DNR-managed public lands.
 - Trail connections totaling 850 miles toward the completion of the 1,450-mile Iron Belle Trail.
 - One hundred miles on the North County Trail throughout the state.

- Major connections linking communities to state park trails in the following areas:
 - Maybury State Park
 - Island Lake Recreation Area
 - Waterloo Recreation Area
 - Pinckney Recreation Area
- Approximately 220 miles of permanent snowmobile trail easements from two commercial forest companies in the Upper Peninsula.

Goal 2: Foster regional economic prosperity

Economic activity and tourism.

- Michigan's economy is heavily tied to natural and cultural resources, for example:
 - From 2012 to 2017, total aggregated forest industry jobs increased 27% (32,186 to 40,746).
 - The DNR prepared for harvest an average of 59,029 acres of timber, containing an average of 1 million cords, annually between 2013 and 2020.
 - The DNR is responsible for managing state-owned minerals and assures they are developed safely and properly to optimize revenue consistent with other public interest and natural resource values.
 - Since 2013, oil and gas revenue on state lands has generated total revenue of \$199.7 million.
 - Due to the decline in demand, oil and gas yearly revenue has decreased nearly 60% from 2013 to 2019.
 - Revenue from metallic and nonmetallic mineral leasing increased from \$1 million in 2013 to \$11.2 million in 2019.
- Attendance at DNR facilities and participation in outdoor activities administered by the department is increasing as evidenced by the following information:
 - Day use at state parks increased from 19 million visitors in 2014 to 26.6 million visitors in 2019, with 2020 day-use numbers estimated by Parks and Recreation Division to exceed 30 million. Visitor numbers at historic state parks have increased well over the 3% goal.
 - Annual nonresident state park passes purchased increased from 250,000 in 2013 to 317,000 in 2019.
 - The annual number of anglers who purchased a fishing license for the first time increased from 245,790 in 2013 to 321,835 in 2020.
 - The number of charter fishing boat captains increased from 552 in 2013 to 660 (calendar year 2019).
 - While the number of annual hunting licenses for new hunters (those who have not hunted in the past five years) declined from 99,361 in 2013 to 88,416 in 2020, the department and its partners remain dedicated to their recruitment and retention efforts.
 - The department maintains an ongoing partnership with the Pure Michigan marketing campaign through the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Sharing information, resources and talent, the collaboration reaches residents and visitors to help them learn about fishing, trails, camping, cultural attractions and other outdoor opportunities that they can enjoy in Michigan.

The department is the only state agency that pays Payments in Lieu of Taxes to counties and townships on the land owned by the department. In fiscal year 2020, 3.53 million acres of tax reverted status properties and 1.07 million acres of purchased properties generated payments totaling over \$28.2 million to local governments.

Goal 3: Protect natural and cultural resources

The DNR partners with many organizations who contribute toward shared conservation goals as outlined in numerous plans, including the Upper Mississippi & Great Lakes Region Joint Venture (waterfowl), Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative, American Woodcock Conservation Plan and North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The intent is to increase the capacity for more on-the-ground projects on public and private lands by leveraging partnership opportunities.

There are several grant programs that allow the DNR to direct funds to partners for habitat improvement projects, including:

- **Wildlife Habitat Grant Program.** This program provides funding for projects that will enhance and improve the quality and quantity of game species habitat. Since the program began in 2014, the DNR has awarded \$6.7 million for 102 projects affecting over 16,000 acres statewide.
- **Deer Habitat Improvement Partnership Initiative.** This initiative is aimed at enhancing deer habitat on non-state-managed lands in the Upper Peninsula. Since 2013, about \$614,000 has been awarded to partners for habitat work covering 73 projects on approximately 3,600 acres of land.
- **Deer Private Land Assistance Network.** This program was created to improve food and cover for deer on private lands in the northern Lower Peninsula. Since 2014, \$350,000 in funding has been provided for 66 projects that improve deer habitat.
- **Fisheries Habitat Grant Program.** This program supports projects to benefit fisheries, aquatic resources and the public, including fish habitat conservation, dam removal and repair, and access to recreation. This program, along with the Aquatic Habitat Grant, Dam Management Grant, and the Habitat Improvement Account, has provided approximately \$28.7 million for 121 projects between 2014 and 2020.
- **Michigan Invasive Species Grant Program.** This joint effort between the DNR, the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, and the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, supports projects that prevent, detect, manage, and eradicate terrestrial and aquatic invasive species. Since 2014, the program has awarded over \$25 million to 173 projects resulting in invasive species treatment of over 38,500 acres of land and water statewide.

The department has continually maintained dual third-party forest certification for 3.9 million acres of state forest lands since 2005 under both the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® and Forest Stewardship Council® forest management standards. Maintaining these certifications requires annual surveillance auditing and includes re-certification audits every three to five years. All projects on state forest land, including timber sales, require a rare species review during development to evaluate the potential impacts of the project on rare species. If potential impacts are identified, mitigation measures are implemented, as appropriate.

A comprehensive database of archaeological cultural resources on Michigan lands, including

all DNR-managed public lands, is maintained by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). SHPO currently maintains archeological site records on paper and United States Geological Survey quadrangle maps. In conjunction with SHPO, the department has updated the DNR's priority list of above-ground buildings of historic significance in Michigan state parks and specific cultural resources are identified in park management plans at the time the plans are developed.

The DNR also has developed a strategy using current GIS-based classification systems to protect representative river, lake and Great Lakes coastal habitats. In 2017, a classification system was developed that divided the Great Lakes into 77 aquatic ecological units. The DNR's Institute for Fisheries Research GIS working group is actively developing publicly available GIS tools based on the aforementioned classification systems. The conservation and management of aquatic species and their habits are identified in Fisheries Division's strategic plan, "Charting the Course".

Progress on key actions

Project boundary review

The 2013 Managed Public Land Strategy called for privately owned lands within the dedicated project boundaries to be reduced by 1 million acres. In 2020, DNR staff reviewed department project boundaries that were dedicated in 2004 to make necessary changes and eliminate private inholdings to accurately reflect current priorities for ownership. Periodically reviewing and adjusting these project boundary lines helps to ensure that the dedicated project boundaries reflect the most accurate and current public land ownership priorities and needs, such as is the case with the 2020 boundary review. The 2020 dedicated project boundaries contain a total of 5,502,300 acres compared to the 2004 total of 6,569,500 acres, a reduction of 1,067,200 acres.

State land review

The department is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of over 240,000 acres of DNR-managed land that meets the following criteria: 200 acres or less in size and isolated from other DNR lands; or lands that are difficult to administer due to the irregular shape of their boundaries. The DNR is systematically evaluating these parcels in batches of 10 or 11 counties at a time, using a multi-disciplinary, multi-tiered approach that takes into account whether each parcel is contributing strongly to the department's mission. Based on a number of considerations, program review, and public input, parcels will be placed into one of four categories: dispose, offer to a local unit of government or an alternate conservation owner, make available for land exchange or retain in state ownership. The first batch of 10 counties is due for DNR director action in June 2021 and the entire process is slated for completion by the end of 2023.

Proposed changes to the strategy

Public Act 240 of 2018 also requires the DNR to prepare an update to the 2013 land strategy and to identify any proposed changes to the goals, as well as rationale for those changes. It is important that the updated land strategy accurately reflects the responsibilities and mission of the department and the resulting priorities and goals the DNR seeks to achieve on public lands for the benefit of Michigan's residents and visitors.

The original 2013 strategic goals were as follows:

- Goal 1: Provide quality outdoor public recreation opportunities
- Goal 2: Foster regional economic prosperity
- Goal 3: Protect natural and cultural resources

The 2013 land strategy placed an emphasis on the DNR maintaining a complex set of metrics to determine successful implementation of the plan. Through the department's analysis and reporting efforts, it was discovered that many of the metrics and measurable objectives in the original strategy had limited data available for analysis and required additional resources to calculate and track; while others relied too heavily on activities out of the DNR's control, such as changing market conditions or changes in recreation.

While the focus of each of the original goals remains, they have been restructured to better align with agency mission and management objectives and leverage the department's other strategic plans. The structure has been amended from "metrics" and "measurable objectives" to "strategies" and "measurable objectives." The new proposed goals center around the ideas of "protect, provide and perform" and read as follows:

- Goal 1: Protect natural and cultural resources
- Goal 2: Provide access to outdoor public recreation opportunities
- Goal 3: Perform responsible natural resource management

A few of the key proposed changes to these goals include:

- New strategies to address emerging challenges the DNR has identified as essential, such as addressing the introduction and spread of invasive species and adapting to and remaining resilient to a changing climate.
- Modifying the previous goal of "Foster regional economic prosperity" to be more reflective of the DNR's constitutional and statutory authorities and responsibilities by shifting the focus to responsible natural resource management. This includes sustainable management of the state forest, mineral development, recreation industry opportunities, and renewable energy.
- Emphasis on diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility of those using DNR-managed public lands, recognizing that all residents should have the opportunity to enjoy the state's natural and cultural resources.

Additional overall adjustments were made to ensure that the measurable objectives and strategies are realistic and progress toward accomplishing them is achievable within the six-year timeframe of the plan. Another new focus of the proposed strategy update is to recognize geographic and demographic disparities in access to public lands and seek to provide a more equitable, inclusive and accessible public land base.

The proposed changes to the goals and to the entire land strategy will be more aligned with the constitutional and statutory authorities of the DNR, reflect present day priorities, and allow progress to be easily measured and tracked for increased transparency during implementation.

Engagement and collaboration with local units of government

As part of the process to develop the updated land strategy, the department assembled a land

strategy sprint team. One of the key components of the sprint team was to create an engagement strategy to inform, involve and collaborate with local units of government in the development of the updated plan.

To ensure that local units of government were included throughout the planning process, members of the sprint team arranged meetings early in the update process with key leaders at the Michigan Association of Counties (MAC) and the Michigan Township Association (MTA). The purpose of these meetings, which occurred in June 2020, was to provide information on the process for updating the land strategy and to learn how to best engage with MAC and MTA members.

Beginning with these initial meetings, sprint team members kept in contact with MAC and MTA leaders to ensure regular communication as the development of the strategy progressed. In cooperation with the MTA, the DNR wrote an article on the land strategy for its monthly magazine, Township Focus, which reaches approximately 6,500-plus elected and appointed government officials. This article was published in the October/November 2020 edition.

As draft components of the land strategy were developed and made available online for input (via Michigan.gov/PublicLands), local units of government were informed of the opportunity to review and submit comments on these draft components through press releases, social media posts, other electronic news bulletins, and notifications provided to their members by the MAC and MTA. In addition to the draft land strategy components, the website also included a description of the land strategy update process, a frequently asked questions section, and a “contact us” section with a dedicated email address, DNR-LandStrategy@michigan.gov, for people to send questions, comments and feedback on the draft land strategy components.

The DNR also hosted four facilitated stakeholder sessions for the following regions: southern Lower Peninsula, mid-Michigan, northern Lower Peninsula and the Upper Peninsula. The following local units of government were invited to these meetings:

- Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
- Region 2 Planning Commission
- Southcentral Michigan Planning Council
- Southwest Michigan Planning Commission
- Genesee-Lapeer-Shiawassee Region V Tri-County Regional Planning Commission
- East Michigan Council of Governments
- West Michigan Regional Planning Commission
- Northeast Michigan Council of Governments
- Eastern U.P. Regional Planning and Development Commission
- Central U.P. Planning and Development Region
- Networks Northwest
- Western U.P. Planning and Development Region

In addition to the facilitated stakeholder meetings, individual meetings were held with the MAC Environmental Committee members and with leadership at MTA to further discuss the draft components, respond to questions, and accept comments and suggestions. Additionally, the MTA provided written comments on the draft components.

All comments received were evaluated and incorporated, as appropriate, into the comprehensive draft land strategy, which was again made available for comment in early

2021. The sprint team again worked with the MAC and MTA to make their members aware of the opportunity to review and provide input via a survey or via email on the comprehensive draft document. This was accomplished through a press release, social media posts, other electronic news notifications, and efforts of the MAC and the MTA. Sprint team members again held individual meetings with leadership at both the MAC and MTA to discuss the comprehensive draft and ensure their comments were taken into consideration.

The DNR will continue to work closely with the MAC and the MTA as the updated land strategy is implemented.

Conclusion

As the DNR prepares to close the books on the 2013 Managed Public Land Strategy and shifts its focus to the implementation of the proposed updated 2021 land strategy, it is eager to submit the full, comprehensive land strategy to the Legislature for review and consideration.

For more information

If you have any questions about the 2013 Managed Public Land Strategy or the proposed revised land strategy, contact DNR Senior Adviser for Wildlife and Public Lands, Scott Whitcomb, via email at WhitcombS@Michigan.gov.