

The Power of Public Lands: Michigan Department of Natural Resources Public Land Strategy 2021-2027

Department mission

The DNR is committed to the conservation, protection, management, use and enjoyment of the state's natural and cultural resources for current and future generations.

The department strives to protect resources, ensure sustainable recreation use and enjoyment, enable strong natural resources-based economies, improve and build strong relationships and partnerships, and foster effective business practices and good governance.

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Section 1 – Overview

Why public lands matter

Mountain biking on a scenic forest trail. A family beach trip on a summer day. Heading to the woods to take part in Michigan’s time-honored hunting tradition. Camping by the lake. Bird watching in a wetland area. Exploring the state’s rich history among towering white pines, limestone cliffs and Great Lakes shorelines.

If you enjoy these activities, or the countless other outdoor opportunities woven into the fabric of our lives as Michiganders, chances are you have experienced the power of public lands.

The Department of Natural Resources is responsible for taking care of the approximately 4.6 million acres of public lands that are owned by Michigan residents. Those lands include state forests, game and wildlife areas, state parks, trails and other DNR-managed public lands. Public lands also exist at the federal, state and local level, but this strategy focuses exclusively on DNR-managed public lands. These are the “public lands” referred to throughout this plan.

Management of public lands is not accomplished by the department alone. It is achieved through collaboration with members of the public, many stakeholders, conservation partners, and the various industries – timber, oil and gas, sand, gravel and more – that rely on the sustainably managed natural resources Michigan’s public lands offer.

This strategy provides a framework for the conservation and stewardship of DNR-managed public lands to ensure their best use for the benefit of Michigan residents, visitors and the state’s natural and cultural resources. It provides goals, strategies and measurable objectives to guide us in:

- Protecting and preserving Michigan’s natural and cultural resources.
- Providing spaces for quality outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Performing responsible natural resource management.

When lands are well taken care of, they strengthen the state in several ways. For example, public lands support Michigan’s environmental well-being with healthy forests protecting and promoting water quality. Additionally, caring for vegetation protects against erosion. They provide residents with ample outdoor recreation opportunities – often very close to home – to be physically active, clear away mental stress and discover new pursuits. These public lands also play a key role in Michigan’s economic health by enhancing local and regional economies.

Careful and thoughtful oversight of DNR-managed public lands has led Michigan to not only be a great place to live and work, but to be regarded as one of America's favorite travel destinations – no matter the time of year. Whether there's snow on our trails, or our forests are ablaze with fall color, residents and tourists of all abilities get to have incredible experiences on public lands through diverse and inclusive outdoor recreation opportunities.

The long-term efforts resulting from this plan will foster cultural and natural resources appreciation, help build a healthy environment, provide spaces for people to get outdoors, protect and preserve Michigan's woods and waters, and create a strong land-based economy. The benefits of such management of public lands will extend to Michigan residents, visitors and future generations.

Economic value of public lands

DNR-managed public lands play a significant role in supporting many aspects of Michigan's economy:

- Michigan's state parks, which draw 28 million visitors each year, act as a catalyst to attract out-of-state tourists and provide a focal point for activities that drive local economies.
- Home to many tourist attractions – known for both their unique natural beauty and rich history – DNR-managed public lands are the backbone of Michigan's \$20 billion-plus tourism industry.
- Harbors and boating access sites on DNR-managed public lands also provide access to the Great Lakes and inland lakes and streams for boating, which has an economic impact of more than \$7 billion a year in Michigan.
- Michigan's state game and wildlife areas, state forests and state parks offer abundant places to hunt, fish and watch wildlife, all activities that help drive the state's economy. Hunting contributes almost \$9 billion and fishing contributes more than \$2 billion annually.
- State forest land supplies about 20% of the timber consumed by the forest products industry statewide. The industry contributes \$20.2 billion and more than 91,000 jobs to the economy annually.
- Approximately 599,000 acres of DNR-managed mineral rights are leased for mineral exploration and extraction. The mineral extraction industry contributes over \$20 million and 5,000 jobs to the Michigan economy annually.

Sources: Appendix E

Overarching principles

In addition to the core functions of the DNR, there are standards, which are equally important and serve as the foundation for department operations. These “overarching principles” reflect department ideals, values and priorities, and guide decision making. The principles are commitments to the public and guide the way the DNR cares for the state’s natural and cultural resources, including DNR-managed public lands.

Accountability/good governance

The DNR is open, transparent and accountable to the people of Michigan. Public input is a primary driver for informed decision making within the department. The DNR offers a range of opportunities – both in person and via technology – for people who are interested in learning more about and providing feedback about its work. More than 20 resident-based boards, committees, councils and commissions hold their public meetings in open, inclusive forums and provide content in a range of accessible formats following meetings. Public meetings aren’t the only time the DNR accepts feedback or comments; people are welcome to call, email or stop by customer service centers when they need assistance. When it comes to conducting business, whether through timber sales, mineral, oil and gas auctions, or land acquisition, easements and exchanges, the DNR engages in open and competitive processes to ensure fair transactions. The department is increasingly using technology tools such as interactive maps, open-data portals and online meeting platforms to provide and enhance the public’s understanding and participation in decision making processes. Through public meetings, open houses, social media, electronic news bulletins, its website and more, the department remains transparent and provides updates to help people understand how and why decisions are made about DNR-managed public lands.

Diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility

The DNR is committed to the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility in administering and managing Michigan’s public lands. The state’s population is diverse, dynamic and ever-changing, and the lands and facilities the department takes care of must reflect the different experiences, geography and communities it serves.

Diversity is represented by lands and facilities that are geographically dispersed across the state to provide opportunities close to where people live and work. Public lands should offer a range of outdoor experiences on both developed recreation facilities and wild, natural spaces.

Equity involves offering reasonable opportunities to Michigan residents and visitors to experience public lands and pursue recreation. The DNR strives to remove barriers that limit the use and enjoyment of public lands and provide accessibility where possible.

Inclusion is the department's commitment to better understand the way people of all abilities experience the outdoors and provide opportunities that make people feel welcome on DNR-managed public lands.

Tied to the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion, the DNR remains committed to providing accessible year-round recreation for people with disabilities. Through adaptive equipment, track chairs, accessible blinds and more, the department is focused on solutions to make visits to facilities enjoyable and meaningful for all.

Public safety

The DNR is dedicated to protecting and serving the people, places, and natural and historical resources of Michigan. The safety of residents enjoying the outdoors is of utmost importance; a priority accomplished through effective law enforcement and public outreach and education. Michigan is home to a diverse population with varying levels of experience and comfort in the outdoors, and the department is committed to ensuring that everyone feels safe, secure and welcome on DNR-managed public lands. These lands are used for many purposes – from dog-walking and nature photography to fishing, hunting and riding ORVs. Michigan's extensive public land base ensures that there's room for everyone to safely and responsibly enjoy their favorite outdoor activities.

Education

Michigan's DNR-managed public lands are bursting with education opportunities for children and adults alike. The department is committed to creating and providing engaging and relevant education initiatives to help people understand why the work it does is important, how resources are managed and invite them to play a role in helping to take care of those resources. Visitor centers, fish hatcheries, customer service centers, historical sites and the Outdoor Adventure Center in downtown Detroit are just some DNR locations where people can go to learn more. In addition to traditional education opportunities, the department has brought its education programs into homes with virtual programming. Outdoor Skills Academy classes teach people how to fish for steelhead, manage their property for wildlife habitat, hunt turkey and more, which in turn helps the DNR's mission to recruit and retain new users. These engaging methods are helping people learn about management and protection of Michigan's natural and cultural resources while teaching about the importance of conservation. DNR-managed public lands are places for families, school groups, hunters, anglers and everyday explorers to learn and enjoy.

Public health

Spending time outdoors has been shown to benefit overall health and well-being. Hundreds of health studies have reinforced the fact that exposure to nature and time reduces stress, boosts immunities, enhances memory, helps with chronic pain, stimulates

creativity and more. With all these benefits, it's easy to make the case that an investment in public lands is a smart investment in public health. DNR-managed public lands provide residents with close-to-home avenues to be physically active and to mentally recharge. The DNR, through its Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry, is committed to supporting the health and well-being of Michigan's residents by working with industry partners from many sectors to anticipate emerging trends, create effective policy and elevate outdoor recreation opportunities and resources across Michigan.

Partnerships

It wouldn't be possible for the DNR alone to accomplish its mission of conserving, protecting and managing Michigan's natural and cultural resources for current and future generations. That's why strong relationships with diverse groups and organizations are key to expanding opportunities to further the department mission and values. Success depends on seeking different perspectives, adding new voices to the conversation surrounding conservation, and honoring long-held traditions as the DNR adapts.

Such partnerships are based on open communication, trust, similar values and goals, and mutual respect. The DNR is committed to working with partners at the international, tribal (see Appendix D), federal, state and local levels – keeping an eye toward potential relationships with new entities. Partnerships with nongovernmental organizations are especially critical to the work of protecting and managing the state's natural resources. Finally, partnerships with the public – ranging from community scientists who identify invasive species, to the “eyes in the field” who report natural resources violations and concerns as well as positive things like wildlife observations to assist with species surveys – are invaluable in furthering the work of the DNR.

Promotion

The DNR actively promotes activities, opportunities and programs associated with public land resources and management throughout the state. Recruiting, retaining and reactivating interest in traditional outdoor activities such as fishing and hunting remain a priority and a focus of department outreach and marketing efforts. Adapting to changing interests and looking for novel ways to communicate with a diverse user base, including the media, are critical to ensuring all Michiganders can take full advantage of DNR-managed public lands. The department leverages technology and is committed to seeking new opportunities for engagement so that anyone – all ages, abilities and walks of life – can connect with Michigan's outdoors. This will be achieved through a variety of outlets, including in-person, educational tools and social media. The DNR also will seek to maintain Michigan's nationwide reputation as a four-season travel destination through travel and tourism campaigns.

Maintenance, stewardship and restoration

DNR-managed public lands, infrastructure and facilities require routine attention and long-term care and maintenance. As one primary example, the department maintains ecological integrity on public lands by fighting invasive species, using prescribed fire effectively and restoring degraded lands. While many DNR-managed public lands programs promote acquiring lands, enhancing facilities and providing new recreation opportunities, there also exists a core commitment to caring for existing lands and amenities through attentive maintenance, stewardship and restoration.

Why a land strategy?

A comprehensive land strategy guides the DNR in its stewardship of the 4.6 million acres of public lands owned by the people of Michigan. That includes 3.9 million acres of state forests, 357,000 acres of state parks and recreation areas and 364,000 acres of state game and wildlife areas.

Using the overarching principles, which reflect the department's mission, values and priorities as a guide, this strategy is built around several components:

- Tools for public land administration, including dedicated project boundaries[^], land transaction processes and types of land ownership rights.
- Strategic approach to land acquisitions.
- High-level goals, specific strategies and measurable objectives to track progress.
- Strategic initiatives.
- Resulting outcomes.

Whether the DNR is planning timber management on the state forest, ensuring access to statewide outdoor recreation opportunities or working with a city planner on a proposed urban pathway, keeping these components in mind will help accomplish the strategy's three main purposes:

1. Demonstrating how responsible management of the state's large public land base is important to the protection of our natural and cultural resources[^], which further serves to benefit:
 - a. The health and well-being of Michigan residents.
 - b. Michigan residents' quality of life.
 - c. Michiganders' heritage and identity.
2. Setting priorities and guiding actions related to the lands held in public trust and administered by the DNR.
3. Complying with Public Act 240 of 2018 (see Appendix B), which requires the DNR to:

- a. Provide an updated strategy to the Legislature for consideration and approval by July 1, 2021.
- b. Provide a report on progress toward the goals defined in the [2013 Managed Public Land Strategy](#) (see Appendix C).
- c. Detail proposed changes to department goals, including the rationale for the changes.
- d. Engage and collaborate with local units of government.

[^] Denotes words and phrases defined in Appendix A.

History of DNR-managed public lands in Michigan

Strategic land ownership has always been a priority for the people of Michigan. From the time Michigan became a state, its residents have been the owners of substantial acres of public land, held in trust by state government. Over the course of several decades, the state implemented a deliberative review of land ownership, making determinations about what lands should remain in a public trust and which lands would be more appropriate in private ownership. As a result, these lands, managed by the new Department of Conservation (precursor to the DNR), formed the foundation for the current-day state parks and recreation areas, boating access sites, historic sites, game and wildlife areas and state forests.

Excerpt from “The Land Nobody Wanted,” published by Michigan State College in 1945

In 1921 state forests totaled 113,800 acres, state-owned game refuges were limited to a single one, and the system of State Parks was rudimentary. ... By 1930 the area in state ownership was 1,700,000 acres. The state forests had been increased to 12, covering 600,000 acres. Game refuges numbered seven, embracing 53,900 acres and the complementary program of public hunting grounds to go with the sanctuaries was just getting under way. ... in 1938, with tax sales resumed, the great impoundment of delinquency broke and over two million more acres came to the Conservation Department, just about doubling its holdings. In the meantime, another factor had entered the picture. Not only was the state retaining the bulk of its land, but the state was actually buying acres to add to its public domain. Game license funds had been set aside by statute to purchase choice parcels of game cover needed to augment the large tracts of leaner stuff on hand, and these parcels — principally deer yards — totaled thousands of acres annually. Later, a part of each fishing license fee was earmarked, again by the legislature, for the purchase of water frontage so the angling public might have better access to and more undisputed rights on lakes and streams. The federal Wildlife Restoration Act provides funds raised by an excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition, some of which may be used for land acquisition, and Michigan annually avails itself of this means, of obtaining title to acreage needed to provide more public hunting grounds (**see Appendix F**).

Michigan.gov/PublicLands

Tax-reversion cycle

Early state directives supported the sale of public land for settlement and development. Many of these lands went through several cycles of reverting to the state for nonpayment of taxes as the land was cleared of timber and subsequent attempts at agriculture failed. From the 1890s through the 1930s, the state underwent a series of economic downturns that caused these tax reversions – over 116 million acres (the land reverted multiple times).

During this period, unsustainable harvesting of forests was widespread, wildlife was being exploited and agriculture efforts were failing.

Conserving resources

The exploitation of land and natural resources triggered the rise of the conservation movement, and focus shifted to wise allocation of land, rather than sale for short-term gain.

Various commissions, including Public Lands and Fisheries (1873), Forestry (1899) and Parks (1919), were created to manage natural resources and stop the tax-reversion cycle.

These commissions were subsequently eliminated and their functions merged into the Department of Conservation, created in 1921 under the direction of a new Conservation Commission.

One of the first rulings of the Conservation Commission was that state lands bordering the Great Lakes, or any inland lake, were not to be sold but were to be held for the “enjoyment of the people.”

Throughout its tenure, the Department of Conservation set forth a strategy for its Game and Forestry divisions to work together to manage public land only with concurrence from the other division. This approach was similar to the current concept of co-management, a nationally recognized model that continues to be the cornerstone of DNR public land management.

Reviewing lands for value

In 1922, the Michigan Land Economic Survey was created to review the lands in northern Michigan and determine their value for agriculture or whether they were more suitable for recreation, other public uses or should be sold. As a result of this review, by 1950, over 1.3 million acres were sold, and 130,000 acres were turned over to local governments. The remaining acres were added to state forests, wildlife areas and state parks.

Looking at land ownership

Michigan’s public land policy went through an extensive review in 1984, by the Task Force on Public Lands Policy, which found that the state needed to consolidate its ownership of [Michigan.gov/PublicLands](https://www.michigan.gov/PublicLands)

land and “did not find a need for major changes to land management practices and philosophies.”

In 1996, the Senate Select Committee on Public Land Ownership, Purchase and Management also conducted an extensive study of the DNR’s land acquisition policy as well as other state land-holding agencies. The committee proposed seven “principle changes” in the state’s land acquisition policy, including increasing flexibility in state programs to allow for shifts in land policy, adopting new attitudes and incentives to work with the private sector, and reaffirming the Legislature’s role as the chief conservator of the state’s natural assets.

In 2003, the Ownership Strategy was initiated to review the DNR land ownership pattern, evaluate DNR-managed public lands from a natural resources perspective and dispose of those parcels that did not contribute to the overall mission of the DNR. The purpose of the review was to continue the ongoing effort to consolidate state land ownership for a variety of economic, outdoor recreation and other natural resources benefits. In addition, consolidation of the state land base resulted in land management efficiencies by reducing trespass issues and addressing shooting safety zone encroachments and the need to monitor and survey public/private boundary lines.

Public Act 240 of 2012 required the creation of a strategic plan for public land ownership. The resulting strategy – originally created in 2013, adopted by the Legislature in 2018 and updated as detailed in this document – provides a framework for the conservation and ownership of public lands to ensure their best use for the benefit of Michigan residents, visitors and the state’s natural and cultural resources.

Where we are today

The DNR manages public lands for multiple uses and objectives, using principles of ecosystem management, technologies such as geographic information systems and adaptive management techniques to sustain the diversity and productivity of Michigan’s natural resources. This updated strategic plan focuses on overarching principles, goals, strategies and measurable objectives from department-wide, regional and statewide perspectives. As a complement to the land strategy, each resource-managing division within the DNR has developed separate, more tactical management plans that specifically guide the management of state parks and recreation areas, state game and wildlife areas, state forests and state fisheries (see Appendix G).

This updated land strategy seeks to align and leverage our divisional and departmentwide strategies and priorities – including making Michigan’s outdoors more accessible to individuals of all abilities, combating invasive species, providing for natural resource protection and outdoor recreation opportunities – to set a comprehensive, coherent

direction for the DNR to effectively manage the lands held in the public's trust for current and future generations.

Section 2 – Public lands toolkit

The administration of approximately 4.6 million acres of Michigan's public land base and 6.4 million acres of mineral rights is no small task. Further complicating this are the numerous types of land ownership rights, variety of funding requirements, and a steady number of inquiries and requests for a range of land transactions. To accomplish administering the public land base successfully, the DNR uses a variety of tools and resources.

Dedicated project boundaries

One such tool used by the DNR to help guide the consolidation of DNR-managed land and focus ownership and future acquisition and disposition in priority areas is dedicated project boundaries[^]. The dedicated project boundaries encompass state forests, state game areas and wildlife areas, and state park and recreation areas. The project boundaries include both current DNR-managed public lands as well as privately owned lands that may be a priority for the DNR to acquire in the future if the property becomes available. Consolidation of DNR-managed public lands is especially important to improve efficiency in land management, establish recognizable ownership boundaries, and reduce the likelihood of private encroachment.

Dedicated project boundaries do not encompass state trails, DNR facilities, boating access sites and public water access sites, all of which are also a priority for public ownership. Additionally, lands outside of the dedicated project boundaries may be acquired, as needed, to fulfill the DNR's mission. The dedicated project boundaries, last updated in 2020, are periodically reviewed and updated to reflect changing priorities and land ownership patterns such as land subdivision and development (see Appendix H).

State Land Review

The DNR also conducts a periodic comprehensive statewide review of DNR-managed public lands. The last such review occurred between 2004 and 2008. To comply with and implement the 2013 Managed Public Land Strategy, another State Land Review began in September 2020. This effort involves the comprehensive multidivisional, multilevel review of approximately 240,000 acres of DNR-managed public lands. The review will be conducted on a county-by-county basis in groups of 10 counties. Recommendations for the land under review will receive a thorough public and stakeholder review prior to the DNR director making a final decision on the classification of the parcels. This thorough review will occur over the next few years (see Appendix I).

Land exchanges and disposals

In addition to the comprehensive effort of the State Land Review, the DNR routinely reviews and enters into a variety of land transactions with private landowners and other nongovernmental agencies in an effort to improve efficiencies in management, ensure access to public lands, and focus ownership in priority areas. Among the most common land transactions the DNR considers are land exchanges and disposals, both of which are thoroughly vetted at multiple levels and from a variety of perspectives. The multidisciplinary review of each land transaction culminates in a recommendation from the internal Land Exchange Review Committee to the DNR director, who makes a final decision (see Appendix J).

Ownership rights

The DNR is responsible for managing a variety of land ownership rights. In addition to 4.6 million acres of surface ownership and 6.4 million acres of mineral rights, other land rights managed by the DNR include over 150,000 acres of conservation easement lands, 25 million acres of Great Lakes bottomlands (regulated by the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy), leases (including the DNR as the lessor and lessee), access easements, trail easements, timber rights, hunting rights, aboriginal antiquities rights, and restrictive covenants on deeds (**see Appendix K**).

Acquiring land

A majority of the public land base managed by the DNR was acquired as a result of tax-reversion. The land became state-owned due to the nonpayment of taxes, most commonly in the early 20th century and during the Depression era and due to widespread removal of timber and subsequent farm failures. However, the DNR is now much more focused when it comes to land acquisitions and typically acquires new lands through the purchase of privately owned lands from a willing seller. The DNR uses a variety of funding sources to acquire these priority lands for an array of uses. The funding sources vary including federal, state, DNR-generated and private donations. Each funding source may include special requirements regarding how the land acquired with those funds can be used. While dedicated funding is the most common method for acquiring land, the DNR does receive gifts of land and, to a lesser extent, has received lands through legal settlements and through legislative means (see Appendices L, M and N).

Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT)

The means by which the DNR acquires the land it manages plays a key role in determining which type of Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) are paid on the property. PILT is statutorily required to be made by the state of Michigan to local units of government for public land

that is managed by the DNR and for privately owned land retained for long-term timber production. Lands administered by the DNR are the only state-managed lands on which PILT is required to be paid. No other state agency is responsible for paying PILT on the lands it administers. PILT payments are made from line-item appropriations in the Department of Treasury appropriations act and the School Aid Act. The types of PILT payments are divided into three categories: swamp and tax-reverted lands, purchased lands and Commercial Forest Act lands. The funding source for PILT payments depends on which PILT category the land falls into and ranges from the state General Fund to restricted funds such as the Game and Fish Protection Fund. Likewise, the amount of PILT paid also depends on the PILT category of the land with purchased lands having the highest PILT requirement at the full assessed tax rate, with the exception of the state education tax, and Commercial Forest Act lands having the lowest rate. The PILT payments are distributed to each county and township. (see Appendix O).

Section 3 – Taking action

Strategic approach to DNR land acquisitions

The DNR uses the resources in the toolkit to further accomplish its mission to benefit Michigan residents. Seizing opportunities such as land purchases and exchanges, the DNR is primarily seeking to achieve two objectives: strategic investment in current land holdings and an expansion of service which represents acquisitions in new areas.

Strategic investment

Strategic investment focuses on the consolidation of existing lands within project areas. Project areas are defined by a dedicated project boundary that serves as a long-term goal of DNR land ownership in an area. In many cases dedicated project boundaries will include both DNR-managed public lands and privately owned lands within them, which often reflects the pattern of acquisition of lands over time. For example, many lands may have tax reverted to the state of Michigan to form a core of public land ownership, but then interspersed among these parcels of state lands are parcels that are still privately held, often occurring as a “checkerboard” pattern. As these privately owned parcels become available for sale and funds are available to the DNR, these parcels, known as “inholdings,” may be purchased by the state to fill in the project area in order to achieve a solid, larger and more easily defined block of DNR-managed public lands over time.

Having land consolidated in these easily defined blocks of ownership has many advantages, both to the public and to the DNR staff who administer and manage these lands. The benefits include:

- Land ownership that is easily defined and delineated helps to prevent inadvertent trespass by the public onto private lands or by private landowners onto public lands.
- Large blocks of public land are typically farther away from occupied dwellings, which have a safety zone setback of 150 yards, making it easier for the public to hunt, track and retrieve game.
- Consolidated ownership often provides better habitat and offers ecological values that smaller, isolated parcels often do not have.
- Reduced public land-private land interface means fewer encroachment issues or land use issues that occur along complex boundary lines.
- Management activities, such as timber harvests, prescribed burns or habitat improvement projects are often easier to accomplish on larger blocks of consolidated ownership.
- Administrative efficiency is drastically improved when land ownership is consolidated.

Consolidating existing DNR ownership into larger, more easily definable blocks of public ownership often multiplies the benefits of existing lands because private inholdings detract from those conservation and recreation values associated with public lands. Because of the many advantages of consolidated land ownership, land consolidation efforts are among the highest priority for DNR acquisitions. The acquisition of priority parcels to achieve consolidation may occur through purchase, land exchange, gift or other means. Some of the most iconic state lands in Michigan have been acquired by using the land consolidation model. An example is the Pigeon River Country State Forest, which started out as a 6,400-acre tax-reverted parcel. Over time, lands were added to provide habitat for a growing elk population, including 53,000 acres of land acquired through hunter license fees. Now the Pigeon River Country is well over 100,000 acres and is the largest, most contiguous block of state land in the Lower Peninsula (see Appendix E).

Expansion of service

Expansion of service involves either the acquisition of lands that are not currently associated with existing dedicated project boundaries or the establishment of new project areas in order to meet DNR priorities. Parcels of land in this category may be smaller, isolated parcels that are located outside of a dedicated project boundary, such as a new boating access site. They may also be smaller parcels of land that are associated with existing DNR-managed public lands, such as a parcel of land that is acquired for purposes of establishing a trailhead for a popular designated trail. Other parcels may be larger in size and, as a result, establish their own dedicated project boundary, such as the creation of a state game area in southern Michigan. Unlike the strategic purchase of inholdings, which often results in increased management and administrative efficiencies for DNR staff, lands

acquired as an expansion of service must be carefully considered to ensure adequate capacity exists to manage and administer the new lands. Partnerships with local units of government or other collaborators offer potential opportunities to ensure sufficient capacity.

Strategic results

Both strategic investment in our current ownership and the expansion of service in areas that lack adequate public lands are essential to continue the enhancement and improvement of Michigan's public land base. This public land base, which is constantly evolving for the benefit of Michigan residents, serves as the foundation for accomplishing the goals and strategic initiatives that are set forth in this document and provides the opportunity to achieve fulfillment of the DNR's mission.

Goals & strategic initiatives

The Michigan Constitution and the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act are the authorities which charge the DNR with the specific duties and responsibilities that it is required to execute. Among the most fundamental responsibilities of the DNR are the obligation to protect and conserve the natural and cultural resources of the state, provide for and develop facilities for outdoor recreation, and to implement an ecosystem-based strategy for resource management aimed at protecting and enhancing the sustainability, diversity and productivity of the natural resources of Michigan. A large DNR-managed public land base is essential to, and provides the foundation for, the accomplishment of these core responsibilities.

These core responsibilities are the backbone of the goals set forth in this land strategy. Each goal is comprised of numerous strategies that assist in accomplishing the overall goal. In compliance with statute, each of the respective strategies has a regional focus – southern Lower Peninsula, northern Lower Peninsula or Upper Peninsula – and in some cases, the focus is statewide. Additionally, each identified strategy contains a measurable objective that details work that will be accomplished by DNR staff regionally and around the state to achieve it. Each identified measure will provide an opportunity for the DNR to track progress and communicate results.

The work toward the accomplishment of the identified goals is central to the function of the DNR and will be achieved through the course of day-to-day work. Additional detail of the specific approach to completing this work may also be found in sources such as strategic plans or management plans from department divisions.

In addition to measuring progress toward meeting the identified goals, strategies and measurable objectives, the DNR is committed to identifying new partnerships and growth opportunities for improved management and administration of these remarkable land

resources through the adoption of several new strategic initiatives. It is important to note that in contrast to the goals, which will be accomplished through typical day-to-day work, the strategic initiatives are in addition to normal DNR operations and may require dedicated resources (including funding, personnel and support) to achieve. However, the department believes that the accomplishment of the identified strategic initiatives will result in better management of, and broader, more equitable access to DNR-managed public lands.

Whether developing a plan to make access to outdoor recreation more inclusive and accessible, conducting a timber harvest to enhance wildlife habitat while also supporting the forest products industry, or working to protect our native plants and animals from invasive species – these goals and strategic initiatives outline the priorities of the DNR and its role in managing the public land base.

Land strategy goals

Goal 1: Protect natural and cultural resources

One of the primary, essential responsibilities of the DNR is the obligation to protect and conserve the natural and cultural resources of the state. Ensuring the health and resiliency of Michigan's natural communities on DNR-managed public lands contributes to the state's unique sense of place, the overall well-being of Michiganders, and the distinguished hunting and fishing traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. Protecting the landscapes, buildings and archaeological resources on public lands documents Michigan's heritage and identity for future generations. Together, this goal will be accomplished by strategies ranging from the management of habitat and natural communities to the interpretation of heritage trails – epitomizing the core functions of the DNR.

Strategy 1 (statewide):

Sustainably manage and protect fish and wildlife habitat, natural communities and areas that are managed for a specific conservation value^.

- Measurable objective: Use assessment, management and strategic plans adopted by each of the DNR's resource managing divisions to guide and prioritize habitat and natural community management (see Appendix Q).
 - Measure: Tracking of work toward accomplishment of goals identified in adopted DNR plans.

Strategy 2 (statewide):

Develop proactive ways to adapt, prepare and mitigate emerging and existing threats to natural and cultural resources due to climate change^.

- Measurable objective: Identify emerging threats to natural resources due to climate change and determine the appropriate strategy to address them.
 - Measure: List of identified emerging threats and strategies to address them.

Strategy 3 (statewide):

Address priority invasive species.

- Measurable objective: Implement actions identified in [Michigan's Terrestrial Invasive Species State Management Plan](#) and [Michigan's Aquatic Invasive Species State Management Plan](#).
 - **Measure:** Sites/acres treated for invasive species on DNR-managed public lands.

Strategy 4 (statewide):

Integrate the role of fire in ecosystem management.

- Measurable objective: Optimize the use of prescribed burning as a management tool to achieve ecological restoration, habitat enhancement and silviculture objectives.
 - Measure: Number of prescribed burns and acres conducted on DNR-managed public lands that meet treatment objectives identified in each burn plan.

Strategy 5 (statewide):

Maintain, enhance, replace and remove infrastructure as needed to reduce impacts to natural resources.

- Measurable objective: Regularly inspect DNR-managed dams and conduct a road-stream crossing inventory on DNR-managed public lands. Use the information gathered to prioritize dam removals and culvert/bridge replacement projects.
 - Measure: Number of dam inspections completed and resulting infrastructure projects.
 - Measure: Completion of road-stream crossing inventory and number of resulting culvert/bridge projects.

Strategy 6 (statewide):

Protect and restore DNR-managed public lands impacted by degradation caused by unauthorized uses.

- Measurable objective: Identify areas on DNR-managed public lands where the natural resources have been degraded by illegal uses, prioritize sites for restoration, and secure funding to complete restoration work.
 - Measure: Number and cost of sites restored.

Strategy 7 (statewide):

Identify, protect and interpret cultural resources.

- Measurable objective: Development and implementation of interpretive plans for state parks, trails, state forests and underwater cultural resources (particularly shipwrecks).
 - Measure: List of plans developed and/or implemented.

Goal 2: Provide access to outdoor public recreation opportunities

A core responsibility of the DNR is to provide for and develop facilities for outdoor recreation. With recreation as a cornerstone of the Michigan lifestyle, a large public land base is fundamental to providing for the array of recreation pursuits embraced by residents. Whether enjoying opportunities to be physically active, discovering a new favorite recreation activity, or just appreciating the natural beauty of Michigan, getting outdoors is good for overall health and well-being. Access to outdoor recreation is essential in all corners of the state from downtown Detroit to the grasslands and farm fields of mid-Michigan to the vast forests and winding streams of the northern Lower and Upper peninsulas. Providing and improving access to outdoor public recreation opportunities will be accomplished by strategies ranging from anticipating trends in outdoor recreation to strategic land acquisitions to managing our 13,000-plus-mile designated trail network.

Strategy 1 (statewide):

Provide and maintain diverse recreation experiences[^] while anticipating and responding to trends in outdoor recreation.

- Measurable objective: Offer diverse and accessible recreation opportunities to meet and exceed expectations.
 - Measure: Maintain 80% satisfaction (based on 2018 Michigan SCORP survey results), (see Appendix R) with the quality of public outdoor recreation opportunities.

Strategy 2 (statewide):

Ensure appropriate access to large blocks of public land to offer a variety of dispersed and backcountry recreation experiences[^].

- Measurable objective: Prioritize land acquisition efforts on the consolidation of DNR-managed public lands in an effort to reduce fragmentation and provide for an array of dispersed and backcountry recreation uses.
 - Measure: Number of acres of inholdings acquired and mileage reduction of public/private boundary interface.

Strategy 3 (statewide):

Provide public water access to the Great Lakes, inland lakes, rivers and streams. (Access includes walk-in fishing sites, carry-down boating access sites, trailered boating access sites and harbor/marina facilities.)

- Measurable objective: Develop criteria, prioritize and improve public water access to the Great Lakes, inland lakes, rivers and streams.
 - Measure: Number of parcels acquired with Great Lakes, inland lake, river or stream access.

Strategy 4 (statewide):

Increase access to diverse recreation opportunities in or near urban areas.

- Measurable objective: Strategically invest in urban recreation spaces.
 - Measure: Increase satisfaction with the amount and quality of outdoor recreation close to home using 2018 Michigan SCORP survey results as a baseline.

Strategy 5 (southern Lower Peninsula):

In coordination with local units of government, where appropriate, increase public land ownership in areas that have been identified through a DNR analysis as lacking public lands (see Appendix R).

- Measurable objective: Prioritize land acquisition efforts within areas identified as lacking public land ownership to increase opportunities for public outdoor recreation, including hunting, in southern Michigan.
 - Measure: Number of acres of land acquired within areas identified as lacking public land ownership.

Strategy 6 (statewide):

Manage the more than 13,000-mile state-designated trails network using the 2021 DNR Statewide Trails Plan to guide key metrics and priorities (see Appendix R).

- Measurable objective: Design and locate trails to meet current and future needs.
 - Measure: Number and mileage of designated water, motorized and nonmotorized trails from the established baseline.

Goal 3: Perform responsible natural resource management

The duty to implement a scientifically sound, ecosystem-based strategy for resource management aimed at protecting and enhancing the sustainability, diversity and productivity of Michigan's natural resources is another fundamental obligation of the DNR. Responsible management of natural resource assets involves ensuring timber management and harvests are sustainable, extraction and storage of mineral products and

recreation on DNR-managed public lands are accomplished in a way that protects the long-term integrity of the state's natural resources. Aside from the inherent benefits of healthy forests, wildlife habitat and recreation opportunities, the active management of these valuable resources also significantly contributes to sectors of Michigan's economy and benefits its residents. The management of the state forest system helps to support a vibrant forest products industry. The underground storage of natural gas in Michigan's unique geology helps to drive down heating costs for residents. Making DNR-managed public lands available for recreation activities such as biking on a trail helps to support small businesses in communities along that path ranging from a bike repair shop to restaurants and hotels. The sustainable management of Michigan's natural resource assets will play a significant role as the world continues to mitigate climate change and shift toward renewable energy sources. This approach to the responsible management of our natural resources will be accomplished by strategies ranging from sustainably managing the vast state forest system to the identification of opportunities for climate change mitigation through using DNR-managed public lands as natural climate solutions.

Strategy 1 (Upper and northern Lower peninsulas):

Sustainably manage and protect the state forest system while also maintaining dual third-party forest certification[^].

- Measurable objective: Manage the state forest annually according to the State Forest Management Plan (which guides sustainable harvest, reforestation work, habitat values and recreation) (see Appendix S) while maintaining dual third-party forest certification.
 - Measure: Number of acres planted, and acres and volume of timber prescribed, prepared and sold annually.

Strategy 2 (statewide):

Facilitate responsible oil and gas, metallic and nonmetallic mineral and underground gas storage development through leasing activities.

- Measurable objective: Continue to hold regular oil and gas lease auctions and process direct lease requests to make minerals available for production.
 - Measure: Revenue generated and acres leased annually.

Strategy 3 (statewide):

Contribute to a strong and thriving outdoor recreation industry by marketing the abundance and availability of recreation opportunities on DNR-managed public lands.

- Measurable objective: Highlight DNR-managed public lands and their recreation opportunities in an easily accessible format that is targeted to the public, local units of government, recreation clubs and groups, and recreation industry, among others.

- Measure: Revenue generated annually by recreation use occurring on DNR-managed lands (for example, overnight camping and state-managed harbor stays and Recreation Passport sales).

Strategy 4 (statewide):

Assess the potential for locating utility-scale solar energy on DNR-managed public lands that have been degraded by past industrial use.

- Measurable objective: Develop a comprehensive inventory of DNR-managed public lands that contain brownfields, postindustrial sites, or are otherwise degraded, marginal lands and market them for potential renewable energy development.
 - Measure: Number of developed sites and their total production capacity.

Strategy 5 (statewide):

Identify and address opportunities for climate change mitigation associated with natural resources management on DNR-managed public lands.

- Measurable objective: Conduct a pilot project to determine the potential for DNR-managed public lands to sequester carbon and market the carbon offset credits generated.
 - Measure: Carbon credits[^] generated and sold.

DNR strategic initiatives

More specialized, the strategic initiatives build upon the foundation that is laid by the day-to-day work of DNR staff as outlined in the goals, strategies and measurable objectives. These initiatives offer an opportunity to improve upon existing programs and priorities, leverage partnerships in an effort to strengthen and broaden the impacts of the DNR's work, learn about public perceptions and needs, and better plan for the future. An investment of dedicated resources from funding to personnel may be required in order to accomplish the work outlined in these strategic initiatives.

1. Conduct a comprehensive statewide public survey of the perception of DNR-managed public lands and public land ownership. The results of this survey will be used in the development of the next iteration of the land strategy, due to be submitted to the Legislature in 2027.
2. Resolve issues of federal funding and management compatibility with facilities, land management and land-use practices to ensure compliance with grant and program requirements.
3. Update and expand information about known cultural resources on DNR-managed public lands and state bottomlands for inclusion in the State Historic Preservation Office statewide inventory and databases.

4. Undertake a comprehensive review of DNR-managed public land records to ensure they are current, accurate and can be referenced geographically.
5. Complete a roads plan to ensure appropriate amounts of motorized and nonmotorized access to DNR-managed public lands, while also considering resource protection, infrastructure maintenance and management access.
6. Review existing proposed nominations, as required by statute, to dedicate areas of DNR-managed public lands as wilderness areas, wild areas or natural areas.
7. Work with partners to establish one new “signature park” in a core urban area as a tool for urban revitalization, thus establishing a prototype model of collaboration that can be used in other cities. Considerations will include planning for equal opportunity and inclusive access to outdoor recreation activities for people of all backgrounds and abilities and looking for opportunities to partner with local and regional transportation entities to develop access opportunities.
8. Work with partners including the Michigan Economic Development Corporation and the Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry to build a collaboration prototype to use public lands as a basis to foster economic growth, placemaking[^] and cultural identity[^] in three Michigan communities.

From a strategic approach of acquiring public lands to carrying out the measurable objectives and strategies that will achieve the priority goals of the DNR to the implementation of the progressive strategic initiatives, the DNR is committed to acting on behalf of residents for the benefit of Michigan’s public lands, natural resources and communities. The conservation of the state’s unparalleled natural resources, the diverse array of recreation opportunities, and the responsibility to sustainably manage Michigan’s natural resources depend on the foundation that DNR-managed public lands provide.

Section 4 – Conclusion

Successful management of Michigan’s 4.6 million acres of public lands, along with 6.4 million acres of mineral rights, requires careful, intentional planning. The information shared in this strategy is essential in guiding how the DNR cares for the natural and cultural resources that belong to the people of Michigan and the DNR-managed public lands provide the foundation for this work.

Throughout this document, the DNR has talked at length about the power of public lands. It’s a simple phrase, but one that hints at a treasure trove of opportunities – some of which already are being realized. DNR-managed public lands provide green spaces and wild places where residents and visitors can hunt, camp, fish, hike, ride, relax, recharge and reconnect with nature and history in ways that are uniquely Michigan. Increasingly adaptive facilities and resources mean more people each year get to discover and enjoy the outdoor world. Sustainably managed state forests yield soul-restoring solitude, market-driving raw

materials and healthy habitat critical to the well-being and survival of plant and animal populations.

All these things depend on a public land strategy that is comprehensive, inclusive and dynamic – one that is built to respond and adapt to a variety of change and influences while keeping a laser focus on its original intent. The measurable goals, strategies and objectives in the updated public land strategy will guide the DNR's work and progress in 2021 and beyond.

Outcomes

An effective public land strategy will ensure DNR-managed public lands remain world-class, rivaling anywhere else in the country and serving as a foundation for:

- Future generations experiencing high-quality natural and cultural resources, including a variety of vegetation and natural communities that keep plants, wildlife, fish and other resources healthy and vibrant.
- Diverse, adaptable and accessible public outdoor recreation opportunities for people of all abilities.
- Abundant green spaces in rural and urban areas throughout the state.
- Resilient natural resources that support fish and wildlife populations while offering continued opportunities for thriving, sustainable resource-based industries, like forest products.
- Capacity to explore and support growing markets like renewable energy on marginal or degraded lands, mass timber buildings constructed from Michigan forest products or carbon sequestered in state forests.

What's next

Michigan has unparalleled public lands, managed for a variety of goals that protect natural and cultural resources, provide outdoor recreation and promote sustainable management that benefit people, communities and the economy. Careful stewardship of these resources has resulted in the lands and facilities people enjoy today. As new users turn to outdoor spaces for the recreation and health benefits they provide, our public lands must be ready to welcome them. These new users will not only shape management priorities today but will become the stewards of our natural resources in the future.

During its planning, the department will adapt and implement strategies to respond to changes and threats to Michigan's public lands. DNR facilities and infrastructure, such as harbors, trails and campgrounds, must remain resilient in a changing climate including high lake levels and more frequent storm events. State forests, grasslands and wetlands must remain protected from invasive species, which destroy and degrade natural communities.

And as the nation takes stock of its natural assets, DNR-managed public lands are poised to contribute toward initiatives such as “30x30” – an effort to conserve at least 30% of land and ocean in the U.S. by 2030. The department will continue to provide natural solutions to a changing climate, while providing habitat for wildlife and working forests that benefit our economy.