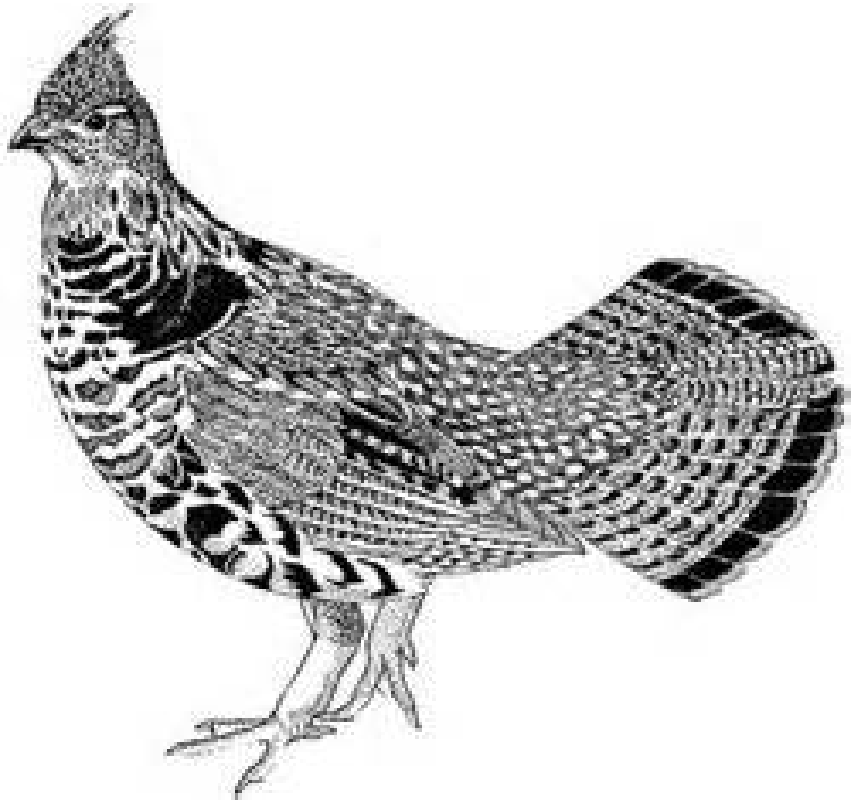
Stanton State Game Area Master Plan
Michigan Department of Natural Resources



Wildlife Division
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September 14, 2016

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Intended Purpose and General Management Direction

The Stanton State Game Area (SSGA) was dedicated in April, 1949. The Natural Resources Commission dedication memo indicated that “the best adapted wildlife for the area included rabbits, squirrels, ruffed grouse, pheasants, deer, waterfowl and furbearers”.

The majority of land on the game area was purchased with federal Pittman-Robertson Funds, but significant acquisitions were also made using the Natural Resources Trust Fund, the Game and Fish Fund and recreation bond monies. The SSGA is located in the Southwest Region (SWR) of the Lower Peninsula in Montcalm County (Figure 1). Over time, the SSGA has been expanded to include 4,925 acres (Figure 2) and is managed to provide quality habitat for ruffed grouse, American woodcock, wild turkey, cottontail rabbits and white-tailed deer and for recreational opportunities associated with these species. Forest management practices (selective and clear cutting) and establishment and maintenance of native grasslands have been the primary habitat management technique on the area.

This master plan covers a 10 year period for field operations at the SGA, while considering how our management will contribute to the long-term (50-100 years) sustainability of important wildlife populations and their habitats.

Background

At a local level, this plan helps fulfill goals and objectives of other higher level Department and Wildlife Division plans and initiatives. The Department goals (protect natural resources, sustainable recreation, strong natural resource-based economies, and strong relationships and partnerships), the Wildlife Division’s Guiding Principles and Strategies (GPS) (Goal 2-Manage habitat for sustainable wildlife populations and wildlife-based recreation, Goal 4-Enhance sustainable wildlife-based recreation use and enjoyment), More Bang For Your Buck concepts (outstanding grouse, woodcock and turkey hunting, challenge of small game hunting), the Division’s Southwest Regional Operational Plan, Southwest Region Habitat Guidance documents, and the Southwest Region Land Management Plan are all reflected in this master plan.

Wildlife Species

True to the intended purpose of the SSGA when it was dedicated in 1949, we will continue to focus our efforts on species and habitats that help meet our goals for the area (Table 1) to provide quality hunting opportunities and our other public trust responsibilities. In addition, guidance provided in the Michigan Woodcock Initiative, the

American Woodcock Conservation Plan, and the Upper Great Lakes Young Forest Initiative will also be considered.

Table 1. A list of species or projects to be worked on during this planning period, reflecting opportunities for habitat or recreational management.

Common Name	***Featured Species***	***T&E, SC Species***	***Climate Change Vulnerable***	***Remarks***
Wild turkey	***X***			***Mast trees, openings***
Cottontail rabbit	***X***			***Brush piles, young forests***
Ruffed grouse	***X***		***X***	***Young forests, aspen***
White-tailed deer	***X***			***Young forests, openings, mast trees***
Woodcock	***X***			***Young forests, openings***

Ruffed grouse and aspen are both predicted to be climate change vulnerable which may impact our ability to effectively meet our desired future conditions outlined in Goal 1 (see below). We will monitor aspen regeneration as part of routine forest inventory and consider alternatives to aspen, as necessary. In general, younger forests are better able to withstand climate change and lowering the average age of forests on the area is likely a good adaptation strategy.

The Michigan Natural Features Inventory (MNFI) Elements of Biodiversity database indicated presence of 3 Element Occurrences on or near the Stanton SGA, 1 State Threatened species: Ottoe skipper (1980) and 2 species listed as Special Concern: Eastern massasauga (1992) and Grasshopper sparrow (2006). Habitat management and other activities will be planned and implemented with consideration for the needs of these species and to avoid take where appropriate.

Existing Conditions

The SSGA consists of gently rolling, mostly forested land. A variety of vegetation types can be found on the area including extensive second growth upland forests (mostly mixed stands of aspen, oak, red maple and white pine), lowland forests (silver maple, red maple, green ash, elm) associated with the Fish Creek watershed, and old fields and red pine plantations that are remnants of agricultural activities (Figure 3).

Compared to other southern Michigan game areas, the SSGA provides a significant amount of aspen and other early successional forest cover (Table 2). These young, dense forests provide valuable habitat for the wildlife species we are managing for.

Since the SSGA is relatively small (4,925 acres) and has similar habitat throughout the entire area, a single set of Goals and Objectives have been selected for the entire area.

Table 2. Current cover types on the Stanton SGA based on MiFi surveys from 2015.

Cover type	***Acres***	***Percent of Game Area***
Aspen	1,199	24
Oak	851	17
Northern Hardwoods	170	3
Mixed Upland Deciduous	439	9
Low Density Trees	141	2
Herbaceous Openland	555	11
Natural Pines	9	<1
Planted Pines	108	2
Upland Shrub	151	3
Lowland Deciduous Forest	424	9
Lowland Coniferous Forest	58	1
Lowland Shrub	423	9
Emergent Wetland	148	3
Water	124	3
Other	125	3
Total	**4,925**	

Recreational Use

The SSGA provides a host of recreational opportunities for local residents and visitors alike, including hunting, trapping, bird watching and wildlife viewing. State Game Areas in southern Michigan are under continual pressure for other uses, however under Federal and State regulations, recreational and commercial uses on the area that are not incidental to our management for the purposes described above are generally not allowed. Some of these uses can be allowed, under the following circumstances:

1. The uses do not interfere or conflict with the wildlife conservation purposes of the area described above.

2. The Department 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 Department 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 Department always reserves the ability to disallow activities previously allowed as wildlife conservation needs dictate.

Additionally, the Department will continue to monitor any existing commercial and recreational uses for interference with the intended purposes of the area as described in this plan.

Impacts on the Local Economy

Contributions to the local economy resulting from activities on the game area include approximately 300 acres of timber management activities every 10 years through contracts with local loggers, plus thousands of hunter use days per year that provide a direct boost to local restaurants, sporting goods stores and convenience stores and gas stations.

Management Direction

The desired future conditions for the Stanton State Game Area are outlined in table 3.

Table 3. Desired future condition of cover types and habitat issue direction on the Stanton SGA.

Cover type and Habitat Issues	Desired Future Condition
Aspen	Increase
Oak	Maintain
Northern Hardwoods	Maintain
Mixed Upland Deciduous	Decrease
Herbaceous Open land	Maintain
Natural Pines	Maintain
Red Pine	Decrease
Mixed Upland Conifers	Maintain
Lowland Deciduous Forest	Maintain
Lowland Coniferous Forest	Maintain
Lowland Mixed Forest	Maintain
Lowland Shrub	Maintain
Emergent Wetland	Maintain
Agriculture	None
Warm Season Grass	Maintain
Cool Season Grass	Maintain
# of Forest Openings	Maintain
Grassland Patches > 150 Acres	None
Grassland Patches >250 Acres	None

Mature Forest	Decrease
Unfragmented Forest	Maintain
Riparian Corridor	Maintain

Goals, Objectives, and Management Actions

What follows is the strategic direction for the Stanton SGA, to be implemented during this planning cycle. This plan describes the **goals** or desired future condition for the area, the **objectives** under each goal, and the **actions** associated with each objective. Goals come mostly from the featured species and habitat issues relevant to the SSGA.

Goal I sustainable populations of ruffed grouse and American woodcock on the SGA and the surrounding area

Rationale: grouse and woodcock are highly desirable game species and managing for their habitat benefits numerous other wildlife species

Metrics: staff observation, hunter surveys and standardized woodcock surveys; assessment of aspen trends through time based on forest inventory data, number of suitable forest openings

Objective A. Increase the accessible aspen cover type on the SSGA by 12% to approximately 1,110 acres and provide a balance of age classes on a 40 year rotation (25% at age 0-10, 25% at age 11-20, 25% at age 21-30, 25% at age 31-40) in a manner that optimizes the spatial arrangement for the benefit of grouse and woodcock by 2065

Action 1. Establish an aspen harvest regime (~240 acres every decade) that will expand and improve the aspen type and optimize the age classes and juxtaposition of aspen stands on the SGA

Objective B. To provide suitable forest openings (mostly 1-10 acres in size), comprising 450 acres (10% of the SGA) for breeding and roosting habitat for woodcock near aspen complexes by 2026

Action1. Maintain and create small (1-10 acres) herbaceous openings at appropriate locations throughout the SGA

Goal II sustainable populations of white-tailed deer on the Stanton SGA

Rationale: White-tailed deer are highly desirable game species. White-tailed deer also benefit from Actions taken under Goal I (above) as young dense forests provide excellent food and cover for deer.

Metrics: staff observation and hunter surveys; assessment of aspen and oak types within IFMAP, number of suitable forest openings

Objective A. Increase the accessible aspen cover type on the SSGA by 12% to approximately 1,110 acres and provide a balance of age classes on a 40 year rotation (25% at age 0-10, 25% at age 11-20, 25% at age 21-30, 25% at age 31-40)

Action 1. Establish an aspen harvest regime (~240 acres every decade) that will result in a suitable amount of young forest on the SGA

Objective B. To provide suitable forest openings (mostly 1-10 acres in size), comprising 450 acres (10% of the SGA) for feeding areas by 2026

Action1. Maintain and create small herbaceous openings at appropriate locations throughout the SGA

Objective C. Maintain the current oak cover type (~850 acres) and increase the oak component in non-oak stands

Action 1. Maintain current oak stands by implementing forest management practices (timber harvest, prescribed fire, herbicide, etc.) on approximately 75 acres every 10 years to ensure regeneration and recruitment of oak

Action 2. When managing other forested cover types, identify opportunities for maintaining or increasing the oak component by leaving oaks uncut

Goal III sustainable populations of wild turkeys on the Stanton SGA

Rationale: Wild turkeys are highly desirable game species and managing for their habitat, especially the oak component of the forest, benefits numerous other wildlife species. Turkeys also benefit from Actions taken under Goals I and II (above) as young dense forests, oak forests and small forest openings provide excellent food and cover for turkeys

Metrics: staff observation and hunter surveys; assessment of oak types within IFMAP, number of suitable forest openings

Objective A. Maintain most of the current extent (~850 acres) of oak cover type on the SGA and balance the age class distribution

Action 1. Maintain current oak stands by implementing forest management practices (timber harvest, prescribed fire, herbicide, etc.) on approximately 75 acres every 10 years to ensure regeneration and recruitment of oak

Action 2. When managing other forested hardwood cover types, identify opportunities for maintaining or increasing the oak component by leaving oaks uncut

Objective B. Maintain or increase the oak component in non-oak stands

Action 1. When managing other forested cover types, including red pine plantations, identify opportunities for maintaining or increasing the oak component

Objective C. To maintain suitable forest openings (1-10 acres in size), on 450 acres (10% of the Stanton SGA) for foraging habitat for turkeys

Action1. Maintain herbaceous openings at appropriate locations throughout the Stanton SGA

Goal IV sustainable populations of cottontail rabbit on the SGA

Rationale: rabbits are popular game species and will benefit from management implemented for Goals I, II and III above

Metrics: staff observation and discussion with hunters; number of brush piles created

Objective A. Provide suitable escape cover by creating brush piles each year

Action 1. Establish a timber harvest regime (associated with Goals I and II) that will require loggers to create 2 brush piles for every acre harvested resulting in 60 brush piles per year (on average)

Objective B. Provide suitable forest openings (mostly 1-10 acres in size), comprising 450 acres (10 % of the SGA) for nesting and feeding habitat for rabbits by 2023

Action1. Maintain and create small herbaceous openings at appropriate locations throughout the SGA (associated with Goals I, II and III) by 2023

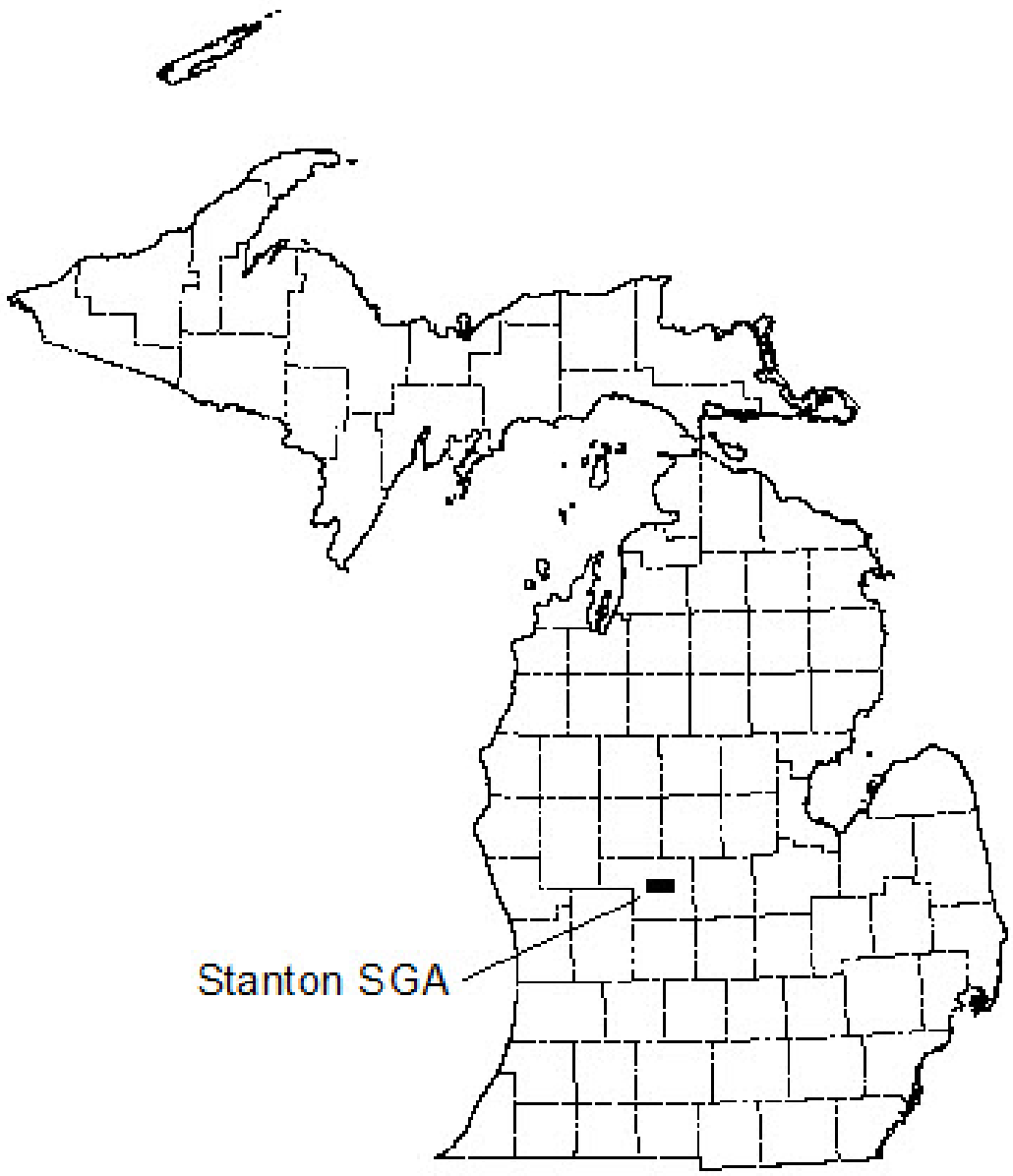

Figure 1. Location of the Stanton SGA.

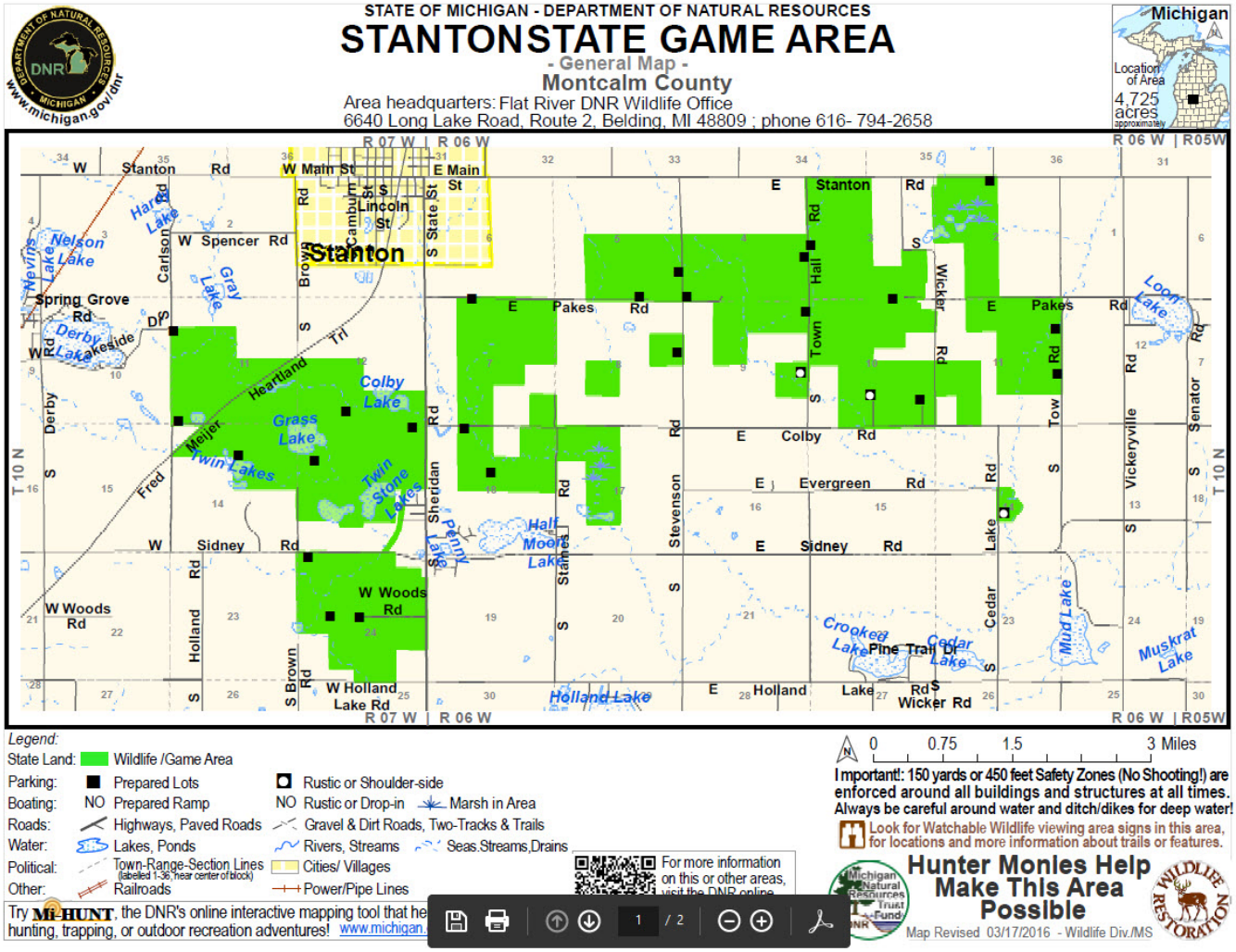

Figure 2. Stanton SGA boundaries.

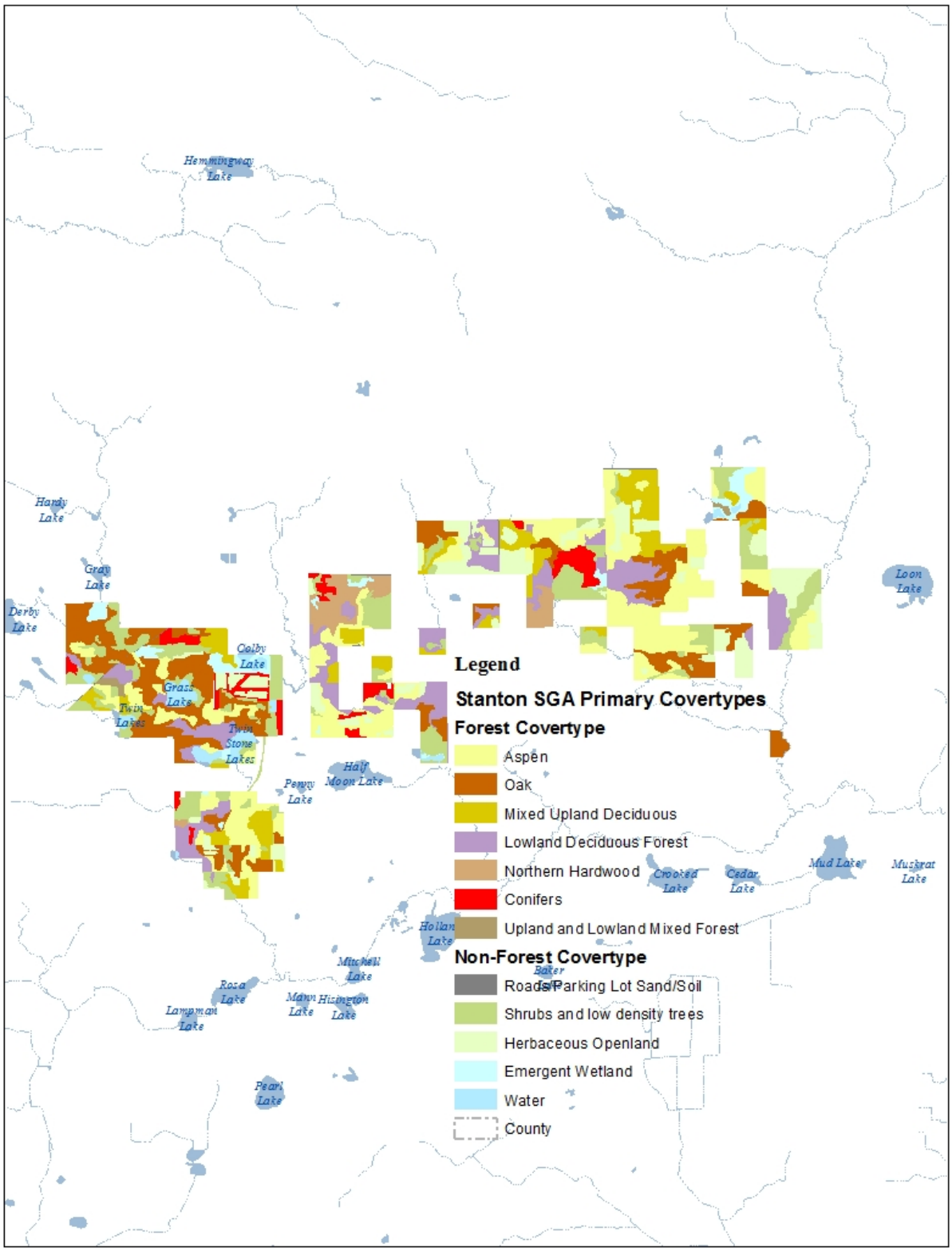

Figure 3. Map representing the major habitat cover type classes in the Stanton SGA.

Acquisition and Disposal of Land

The Stanton SGA is an important game area that provides a host of recreational opportunities for local residents and visitors. Our overall goal is to continue to provide these opportunities. Since the SSGA is located in southern Michigan, the land acquisition strategy for the SGA is to fill in state ownership by acquiring available blocks located within and among current state ownership and where appropriate to expand the area by obtaining parcels that may be outside the current ownership but within the acquisition boundary. Parcels will be evaluated as they become available and will be acquired on a willing seller basis only.

Review and Approval

This plan will be available for public review and comment on the DNR website between February 1, 2017 and February 28, 2017. Changes will be made, as necessary, based on public feedback. Once the plan is approved, it will be placed on the DNR website and will be reviewed again within 10 years of the approved date. Send comments to John Niewoonder NiewoonderJ@michigan.gov

Approvals

(John Niewoonder), Field Operations Manager	Date
(Mark Sargent), Regional Supervisor	Date