

Executive Summary

Long-Range Management Plan

GROTON Management Unit

Prepared by: Barre and St. Johnsbury State Lands Stewardship Teams

Plan Highlights

Size, Location, Facilities

The Groton Management Unit (GMU) 27,165 acres total

- 26,164-acre Groton State Forest
- 642-acre LR Jones State Forest
- 259-acre Levi Pond Wildlife Management Area
- 100-acre St. Hilaire property (Fish and Wildlife)
- 4,214 acres is managed by the Agency of Natural Resources District IV office in Barre
- 22,951 acres is managed by Agency of Natural Resources District V office in St. Johnsbury
- State Parks
 1. Boulder Beach
 2. Big Deer
 3. Kettle Pond
 4. New Discovery
 5. Ricker Pond
 6. Seyon Ranch
 7. Stillwater
- Counties of Caledonia, Orange and Washington (See State Locator Map)
- Towns of Groton, Marshfield, Orange, Peacham, Plainfield and Topsham

Overall Management Goals and Objectives:

- To protect biodiversity.
- To provide opportunities and manage for the continuation and enhancement of high quality recreational experiences and activities (e.g., camping; water-based recreation; trail uses such as hiking, cross-country skiing, equestrian, snowmobiling, and mountain biking; nature study; and hunting, fishing, and trapping) and for other compatible recreational activities.
- To maintain the contribution this forest makes to the local and regional economies.

Inventories and Assessments

The following inventories and assessments were conducted in preparation for the plan. A short summary of each is included in the plan. The inventories and assessments, along with public input, were the basis of the land management decisions by the district stewardship

team. The full assessment documents will be available to the general public at the district offices.

- *Ecological Assessment Summary*-Including a detailed Natural Communities Inventory and Map
- *Watershed Assessment Summary*-Conducted for the first time on the GMU.
- *Forest Health and Protection Assessment Summary*
- *Recreation Resources Assessment Summary*-including Recreation Opportunity Spectrum information. (ROS)
- *Timber Resources Assessment Summary*-Using the Northeast Decision Model (NED-1) forest inventory system.
- *Wildlife Habitats and Species Assessment Summary*-Standard methodology used by the Department of Fish and Wildlife.
- *Fisheries Resources Assessment Summary*-Standard methodology used by the Department of Fish and Wildlife.
- *Cultural Resources Assessment Summary*-Contracted Study conducted by Archaeology Research Center of the Department of Social Sciences and Business.
- *Relationship to the Regional Context, Other Planning Efforts and Economic Studies*
- *Property Tax Considerations*-Contracted Study conducted by Deb Brighton of Ad Hoc Associates.

Public Input Summary

- *1994 -Lake Groton Recreation Use Study.* The Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation and the Center for Rural Studies at UVM conducted this study in response to the Vermont State Legislature's request for a use study at Lake Groton. It was designed to address resource management issues surrounding the implications and impacts of developing additional public access to Lake Groton. Lake property owners were opposed to more public access, but registered boat owners favored it. Use conflicts primarily revolved around the size of motors and the speed of the boats.
- *1997 and 1999 - The district stewardship teams received a proposal from a local group of interested scientists and naturalists for the creation of an Ecological Area within the Groton State Forest.* The purpose of the proposed Ecological Area would be to provide a non-manipulated example of a typical (as opposed to unique or rare) forested landscape, which could be used as a control in studies of land use management history. The group felt the area would have immense scientific and educational value and provide a type of land use management rarely found in New England.
- *1999 and 2004 - The district stewardship teams received a proposal from VAST (Vermont Association of Snow Travelers) for changes to their existing snowmobile trail network and for new trail construction on the Groton Management Unit.* VAST's goals are to be able to adjust to changes on private lands bordering the forest which impact their corridor trails, and to split up the snowmobile traffic through the forest for safety and smoother trails. The team received additional input from VAST in an April 2005 meeting.
- *2004 - At the request of the Vermont Horse Council and various riding clubs from northern and central Vermont, the district stewardship teams held a Groton State Forest equestrian users meeting.* The meeting focused on how ANR could better accommodate equestrian users in Groton State Forest. The participants were

- interested in an improved trail system and associated facilities including additional areas for horse camping. Also discussed was the possibility of a corridor manager for equestrian uses similar to the former Champion lands arrangement.
- 2003 - *Scoping meetings were held in Marshfield and Groton* to get an idea of some of the public concerns and issues regarding management of the GMU. The great majority of what we heard at these listening sessions revolved around recreation related issues and access to the forest.
 - 2004 - *Users (campers, day users, trail users, and Seyon Ranch guests) of the Groton State Forest were surveyed to determine their attitudes toward management strategies and satisfaction with park facilities and services found within GSF.* Satisfaction with facilities and services provided at GSF was quite high and general satisfaction with the management strategies was also very high. Hiking trails, summer recreation, watershed protection and protection of water quality were the highest rated uses. There was also strong support for an unmanaged ecological area or reserve, sustainable timber production, habitat improvement for non game and upland bird species, fishing access, backcountry skiing/snowshoeing, environmental interpretive programs, remote or primitive rental cabins, lean-tos, yurts, scenic view sheds, access for persons with disabilities, free public boating access and to minimize exotic species invasion. Respondents were fairly evenly divided on the issue of snowmobile use. There was one issue that drew a strong negative response, ATV trail use.
 - 2004 - *Survey, "Camp/Cottage Ownership and Use Adjacent to the Groton State Forest of Vermont," nonresidential owners were asked questions about their camps and use of their camps, activities participated in at Groton State Forest, and feelings on management strategies on the Groton State Forest.* Camp attributes most appealing were scenery, proximity to water, presence of wildlife, and seclusion. Activities most appealing included hiking, swimming, and wildlife viewing. As with the user survey, camp owners supported the majority of management strategies at Groton State Forest. Other than ATV use, the vast majority of respondent camp owners did not view the 32 selected management strategies and uses as inappropriate for the Groton State Forest.
 - *Fall, 2006 Meetings on Draft Long-Range Management Plan (LRMP) for Groton Management Unit.* The draft LRMP for the Groton Management Unit was released for public comment in the fall of 2006. During this period, a series of focus group meetings were held in with several stakeholder groups on the draft plan including snowmobilers, forest products industry representatives, horse riding enthusiasts, environmental representatives, and hunting/fishing/trapping interests. A public Open House was also held on the draft LRMP on October 10, 2006. The focus group meetings and public Open House generated significant public input and comment on the draft plan. The Agency also received a considerable amount of written comment on the draft plan during the public comment period. This input was carefully considered in developing the final LRMP for the Groton Management Unit.

Property Tax Considerations

In March 2005, studies on the tax consequences of land conservation in the towns making up the GMU (Groton, Marshfield, Orange, Peacham, Plainfield, and Topsham) were done by consultant Deborah Brighton of Ad Hoc Associates. The reports' conclusions were the same for each of the six towns and are summarized as follows.

- Shrinking the tax base by taking land off the tax rolls for land conservation won't change the **school tax rate**. Similarly, growing the tax base won't change the school tax rate, as long as the district continues to spend the same amount per pupil.
- There is often an increase in the **municipal tax** rate resulting from a conservation acquisition, except when the land is acquired by the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources. In Groton, Marshfield, Orange, Peacham, Plainfield, and Topsham, when land is acquired by the Agency of Natural Resources, the town usually will receive *more* in payment from the state than it would receive if the land remained in private ownership.
- Because, in the long term, permanent conservation of land precludes development of that land, the studies also look briefly at the long-term tax consequences of development. The main conclusion of this report and a recent related study conducted jointly by the Vermont League of Cities and Towns and the Vermont Natural Resources Council (from which this report borrows heavily) is that taxes tend to be higher in towns that have the most developed property, and there seems to be no easy way to develop that will keep taxes low over the long term.

Management Allocations by Land Use Classification Category

- *Highly Sensitive Management Areas* represent 4,527 acres or 17% of the unit. Nine hundred fourteen of these acres are in four state designated natural areas.
- *Special Management Areas* represent 2,960 acres or 11 % of the forest.
- *General Management Areas* represent 19,169 acres or 70 % of the forest.
- *Intensive Management Areas* represent 507 acres, or 2.0% of the lands

Management Highlights by Resource

Management of Seyon Basin

- In developing the final plan for the GMU, the Agency considered establishing a Special Management Area for the Seyon Basin Watershed where logging and motorized recreation would not be permitted. This concept generated considerable public comment, both in support and in opposition. After carefully considering this proposal, the Agency decided not to establish a Seyon Watershed Basin Special Management Area. Instead, the Seyon Basin area will be managed in a similar manner to previous long-range management plans. A major portion of the Seyon Basin has now been classified as General Management in the final management plan. Portions of the Seyon Basin that are steep, adjacent to wetlands or riparian areas, or are within designated Natural Areas have been classified in the plan as Highly Sensitive.

Natural Communities Implementation Strategies

- One of the goals of state lands management is conservation of the plants, animals, and other organisms native to this region. The coarse filter/fine filter method of management will be used to conserve natural communities, primarily through the Agency's Land Use Classification system. Under this system, natural communities will be placed in one of the four categories (Highly Sensitive, Special Management, General Management, Intensive Management) reflecting the level of protection

suggested according to their ranking by the assessment. The most highly sensitive communities will be in the Highly Sensitive category. These communities identified in the assessment include intact examples of rare or uncommon wetland types include dwarf shrub bog, black spruce swamp, and intermediate fen and a number of excellent cliff communities, such as those at Marshfield, Owl's Head, and Big Deer Mountains.

Recreation-Highlights:

- Adequately maintain existing park facilities and roads and improve and upgrade park and recreation facilities to meet current public and visitor demands.
- Management responsibilities for recreation and trails on GMU are divided between the Parks Division and the Forestry Division. Within the Groton State Forest, the Parks Division is responsible for managing visitors primarily at the developed state parks and associated facilities, such as campgrounds, picnic areas, day use areas, buildings, and other intensively use sites. The Parks Division is also responsible for the management and maintenance of the majority of trails with the exception of the VAST snowmobile network, which is the responsibility of the Forestry Division. Typically, the Forestry Division manages the dispersed recreational opportunities such as hiking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, mountain biking, and primitive camping. On the LR Jones State Forest, the Forestry Division is responsible for the abovementioned recreational activities.
- Open New Discovery State Park campgrounds during the November deer season for camping with self-contained RVs and campers. Explore the feasibility of opening the campground during the moose season.
- Continue to provide areas for primitive camping within Groton State Forest and LR Jones State Forest.
- Continue to allow traditional recreational uses of the property, including but not limited to hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, trapping, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing.
- Explore feasibility of developing a car top boat launch on Lake Groton.
- Work with the various trail organizations, such as the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, the Cross Vermont Trail Association, the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers (VAST), the Vermont Horse Council, the Vermont Mountain Bike Association, and others to maintain the trail network, reduce environmental and user group conflicts, to provide new trail opportunities where appropriate and to provide high quality trail experiences.
- Develop volunteer program to assist with maintaining existing and new trail facilities.
- In addition to the traditional recreation uses of hiking/walking and snowmobiling , explore and assess potential new trails on the GMU to meet the increasing demand for other trail uses such as mountain biking and cross country skiing.
- Several hiking, backcountry skiing trails proposed in the Seyon Ranch area including opening the historic hiking trail from Seyon Ranch State Park to Spruce Mountain.
- Explore feasibility of establishing a network of developed trails for mountain biking and cross-country skiing in the Seyon area outside of the Seyon Basin special management area.
- Establish spur snowmobile trail from VAST Corridor Trail #302 to Seyon Ranch State Park.

- Five potential corridors for new multiuse trails proposed throughout the forest, some utilizing existing roads, some new.
- Develop a single-track mountain bike trail associated with New Discovery State Park.
- Establish backcountry cross-country ski trails in the Lye Brook Area, Seyon Basin, and Peacham Bog area.
- A couple of small hiking trail extensions and spurs including extend Silver Ledge trail and establishment of spur trails from Big Deer State Park to Hosmer Brook Trail and the Telephone Line trail.
- VAST Trails- connections to facilitate corridor traffic through the GMU including connection from Peacham Pond to Martins Pond, connection from Depot Brook to Seyon, connection from Depot Brook to Ricker Pond and connection from Butterfield to Seyon.
- The Agency is committed to maintaining a viable east-west VAST corridor across the GMU. If the VAST corridor is disrupted on private lands adjacent to Groton State Forest, the Agency will work with VAST to develop an alternative route in the most appropriate location across the GMU. In the event an alternative route needs to be found across the GMU to connect with VAST trail #302, the Beaver Brook Road would likely provide the most appropriate location for a new east-west corridor.

Timber Harvest-Highlights:

- 22,784 acres (84% of the total) in the GMU are classified as available for timber harvest. Specific vegetative management practices are as follows:
 - 5,003 acres managed even aged on a hundred year rotation - 52 acres per year
 - 16,236 acres managed uneven aged on a 20-year cutting cycle - 527 acres/year
 - 719 acres of deer wintering habitat managed uneven aged
 - 264 acres managed as grouse production areas
 - 132 acres managed as mast producing areas
 - 330 acres managed as snowshoe hare production areas.

Wildlife Implementation Strategies

- The following selected types of wildlife habitat are of special importance in Vermont. The management and conservation of these areas is described. New forest roads and recreation corridors will be located in a manner that will minimize the impact to these habitat types. These habitats will each be managed under a set of specific guidelines - deer wintering areas, mast production areas, and vernal pools/communal breeding sites.
- Other wildlife habitats under special management include grouse production areas, woodcock, and snowshoe hare production areas.
- Other wetland habitats including beaver influenced wetlands and talus/cliff habitats will also be under special management guidelines.
- Log landings and historic openings have been maintained in an open condition and it is our intent to maintain these openings by mowing on approximately a three-year interval.

Fisheries Implementation Strategies

- Continue periodic visitation and sampling at GMU waters to monitor the status of and document changes in fish communities over time.
- Continue periodic visitation and sampling of GMU waters to monitor the status of and document changes in water chemistry that may identify previously undetected limiting factors for fish populations and other related biota.
- Expand documentation of fishing activity, fishing quality and fish resource utilization.
- Evaluate the feasibility of portage development at several of the smaller ponds to enable access by anglers wishing to use canoes or other portable watercraft.
- Improve access where possible
- Continue the current course of fisheries management
- Management of fishery resources at ponds on the periphery of the GMU – Groton, Martins, Peacham, and Turtlehead (or Marshfield) ponds – is not within the purview of this long-range management plan, and will not be discussed here. Fishery resource protection and management at these public waters of the State is a general and on-going responsibility of DFW’s Fisheries Division.
- Provision of access to the GMU’s peripheral public waters is within the scope of the GMU LRMP.
- The issue of free boat and fishing access to Lake Groton is still prevalent. Revisiting previous recommendations for boat access locations has been attempted in this long-range management plan. Even acknowledging the use intensity problems, there still may be some practical strategies and locations for additional boat access that are reasonable, sustainable and fairer to the general angling public. The previous sites investigated were at the dam, Beaver Brook, Boulder Beach North, and the end of the parking area at Boulder Beach South.
- The four alternatives previously investigated have advantages and disadvantages that were identified, though they need to be reexamined in the context of the passage of two decades since the initial investigation was done. An additional site on the west shore will also be examined for its potential as a boat launch area.
- DFW has a 30-year boating and universal shore fishing access development plan, divided into three phases, that covers the period 1984 through 2013. Development of additional access at Groton Pond is not currently included in the plan. The plan is presently in Phase II. DFW continuously revises Phases II and III using information received from the angling, boating, and physically impaired communities in an effort to create environments where anglers, boaters and the physically impaired can all enjoy the waters of the state. An effort to provide car top boat access for recreational users and anglers will be pursued at both Turtlehead Pond and Lake Groton within the next five years.

Cultural, Historic, and Archaeological Resources Implementation Strategies

- Land management activities taking place on the GMU will protect and maintain cultural and historic resources. Known cultural sites will be documented for future reference, if not already. New sites will be documented as they are found. Recommendations in the University of Maine report will be considered as time, personnel, and budgets allow.

Roads and Public Access Management Implementation Strategies

- No new major (Class A, B, or C) road construction is anticipated during the life of this plan. There may be very short segments constructed to access timber sale landings off of existing roads. Where possible, existing landings and access to them will be used.
- Traditional vehicle access patterns will be continued with the majority of roads opened each spring when conditions allow and closed in December. Some roads will remain gated year-round to allow for low-impact remote recreational activities, minimize disturbances to wildlife, and reduce maintenance costs.

Future Public Input and Monitoring and Evaluation

The Agency of Natural Resources intends that this plan will guide the management of the GMU into the foreseeable future. There is no specific end date. However, the Agency recognizes the need to update, reevaluate, monitor, and adjust the plan based on future changes in conditions or public input. Any major changes to the plan would be proposed as amendments and would be subject to public review and approval by the Agency's State Lands Stewardship Team and the appropriate department commissioner. Public input is an ongoing process, but at a minimum, the Department will hold another series of public meetings in ten years to see if we need to amend the plan.