

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

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Bill Leibnitz
14210 Candlewood Lane NE
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Dear Bill,

Thank you for the thorough summary of issues regarding management of Roseau River WMA (RRWMA). It is abundantly clear from your e-mails that you care deeply about this area, and we always have time to talk with people who want to see improvements in how Minnesota's wildlife resources are managed.

I will attempt to address the primary issues raised in your e-mail:

- Bog mats on Pool 2: As you might imagine, there was never any intention to cause access problems for hunters as a result of a habitat project (in this case, cattail spraying in the northwest corner of Pool 2). In addition to mechanical removal of the mats, RRWMA staff has attempted to mitigate the problem by providing an alternate access and by lowering the water level in the pool by approximately six inches in order to stabilize more of the mat. This latter action was compatible with management for wild rice in other portions of the pool, which was largely successful. Despite lowering water levels, the mats moved during last fall's hunting season. The problem is recognized, and RRWMA staff will continue with measures to maintain access.
- Water level management: Your suggestion to conduct a drawdown in Pool 2 in order to improve the attractiveness of the pool to waterfowl is generally a sound practice. The drawdown in the 1980s that you reference in your e-mail was done to facilitate a major upgrade to the dikes and coincided with dry years. In the absence of this combination of circumstances, Pool 2 is very difficult to draw down due to its very large size and inability to remove and reflood the pool in a timely fashion. Furthermore, the benefits to habitat of a large-scale drawdown, we have learned, come at a cost. For instance, many of the open water habitats that were drawn down to mud flats in the 1980s became choked with cattail as a result of that drawdown. Such sites are returned to open water habitats only at high cost (e.g., aerial cattail spraying). The management plan for the pools does allow for opportunistic partial drawdowns to gain habitat benefits for waterfowl. The plan is up for review in 2010; your input is appreciated as RRWMA looks to improve

management of the pools for wildlife. Your comments about water quality were new information that RRWMA staff will assess in 2010.

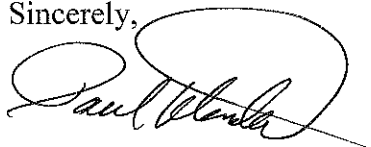
- Moist soils management: There are several moist soils projects in the RRWMA in various stages of consideration/development. One of these projects is in the ag fields north of Pool 3. Part of this development would be in the sanctuary, part would not be. This project has been placed on the list of projects for preliminary engineering work and will likely be addressed within the next year. Assuming a there is a reasonable way to create such a moist soils unit, funding then will be sought and plans drawn up. Until the feasibility study is completed, more details simply are not available, but the point here is that some of what you suggest for habitat improvements is being addressed. The field you mention north of Pool 2 also can be considered for some version of moist soils management. Its proximity to ag fields in Canada is of some concern since DNR needs to take care not to cause flooding on ag fields.
- Management of fields: I understand your frustration with management of the fields north of Pool 3. In the past 15 years, the fields have produced few crops attractive to wildlife. RRWMA staff and the farmer who has tried to farm these fields are frustrated too. Options for improvements to this situation are limited so long as the ground stays wet at key times of the growing season regardless of who farms the fields. After the current farmer retires, it is highly unlikely that DNR Wildlife will be able to persuade another farmer to take up these fields for the reasons listed above. This, in part, has inspired RRWMA to consider alternative management strategies in these fields (i.e., moist soils management). As for the hay in the fields during the hunting season, the farmer does the best he can to move the hay when he can without rutting the fields. The haying keeps the fields in grass cover (as opposed to being taken over by brush), and this is accomplished at literally no cost to the state.
- Trails: Hunter walking trails in the area you reference were damaged by a winter logging operation in the late 1990s. They have not recovered due to the wet cycle we have been in and because little in the way of funding has been available for rehabilitating such trails. We are aware of the problem but cannot promise a quick fix. Additional vehicular traffic on these trails, we believe, would ultimately be counterproductive as damage (i.e., rutting) would only increase and quality of the hunt, such as it is, would only decline further along these trails.
- Aspen management: Markets for aspen harvest were not available for a good share of northwestern Minnesota until the early 1990s. When markets did emerge, the aspen on the western portion of RRWMA, with the exception of a couple of shear sites from the 1980s, was already 60+ years-old. There was little age class diversity among aspen stands at that time, and many were in serious decline. Thus, RRWMA staff was left with a choice of aggressively harvesting the majority of this aspen over a relatively short period of time or letting it die on the stump and succeed to brush and/or ash stands. Of these two admittedly limited options, they chose the latter in order to maintain the aspen type. Under this scenario, improvements in age class diversity will have to be dealt with the next time the aspen cycles around for harvest. I agree that this was not desirable, but management options at the point in time, that staff had to make decisions, were limited.
- Refuges: A sanctuary is associated with each pool at RRWMA. The Pool 2 sanctuary lies south of where you hunt waterfowl, and it sees fairly good use by ducks and geese in fall. As for the Pool 3 sanctuary, many of your concerns about its effectiveness may be

addressed through the development of a moist soils unit as described above. As for creating new sanctuaries or adjusting boundaries of existing sanctuaries, this is worth considering as conditions change that might affect waterfowl use in a given area. I think you can appreciate, though, that agreement among hunters as to where sanctuaries may be located is often elusive. One person's perfect place for a sanctuary is another person's favorite spot for hunting.

- Budgets & staffing: I do not want you to walk away from reading this letter believing that DNR intends to hide behind reduced budgets as an excuse for not making progress on habitat improvement at RRWMA. We intend to continue to leverage every dollar that the sportsman has paid in license and stamp fees in the most effective manner possible. The math of budgets, however, is reality. Not including labor costs, RRWMA's budget in fiscal year 2010, which runs 1 July 2009-30 June 2010, is \$142,150. Of this total, over \$110,000 goes toward paying for the vehicles, tractors, etc., that are used by DNR Wildlife. That leaves approximately \$30,000 to pay for everything else. Given the breadth and depth of the conservation work accomplished in the RRWMA work area, this figure is admittedly low, but the fact of the matter is that most of our area offices are forced to get by with considerably less. Thus, the discretion of that manager to take on new projects of any sort is limited. As for the manager's position, Stan Wood's position is one of many that DNR Wildlife has left open for salary savings (and to avoid layoffs elsewhere). There are two points I would like to make regarding this vacancy. First, significant habitat accomplishments occurred on RRWMA in the past year. A moist soils unit (100 acres in multiple cells) was completed in 2009 in the Pool 1 sanctuary, and a new water control structure was installed that will allow for better water delivery to the two halves of Pool 1 for waterfowl management purposes. Furthermore, nearly 1000 acres of brush was dozed/cut in the 2009-10 winter, representing one of the best winters ever for brush management accomplishments for brushland wildlife at RRWMA. This work, too, was concentrated on the east end of the work area. These accomplishments, and more, occurred in spite of tight budgets. Second, please know that DNR Wildlife is committed to providing the staffing and supervision needed to accomplish its habitat and recreational goals at RRWMA. That this may take on a different form than has been customary for decades does not necessarily indicate that the unit is valued less or that issues are being neglected. I agree with you that RRWMA is one of the premiere WMAs in the state, and it is the intention of DNR Wildlife to maintain that status.

Again, thank you for your interest in RRWMA. Feel free to contact me or Randy if you wish to further discuss these matters.

Sincerely,



Paul Telander
Regional Wildlife Supervisor

cc: Mike Carroll
Randy Prachar