Friends of the White River

Fall 2004 **Issue #3**

Doyle Administration Takes Interest in White River Protection

Through the efforts of the Friends of the White River and support of Rep. Gary Sherman, the message of conservation in the White River watershed reached the ears of Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle.

The governor responded by including a stop at the White River on his summer itinerary. On Aug. 24, Doyle, along with members of his cabinet and Rep. Gary Sherman and Sen. Robert Jauch, spoke to a gathering of about 50 people on the banks of the White River south of Mason. Doyle stressed the importance of environmental conservation, and officially announced the state's proposal to expand the White River Fishery Area in Ashland and Bayfield counties by 7,000 acres.

This proposed expansion would allow the state to purchase title or easements, from willing landowners, of land along the White River and some tributaries, essentially in the watershed corridor between Hwy 63 in Bayfield County and Hwy 13 in Ashland County.

Mike Kroenke, UW Extension

Governor Jim Doyle, left, speaks with State Rep. Gary Sherman, center, and Friends of the White River's Myron Anderson.

Doyle said that the expansion would ensure that the White River remains undeveloped and open to the public for future generations, confirming the efforts and priorities of many landowners and other interested citizen members of the Friends of the White River.

Lisa Goodman, River Alliance of Wisconsin

The Friends of the White River's Myron Anderson, far right, speaks of the importance of protecting land along the river. Listening are, from left: State Tourism Secretary Jim Holperin, DNR Secretary Scott Hassett, Sen. Robert Jauch, Rep. Gary Sherman, Governor Jim Doyle, and his wife Jessica Doyle.

The decision on whether to grant the state the authority to make such land purchases rests with the state Natural Resources Board, which will take up the issue at its October 26-27 meeting in Cable, Wis. If the proposal is approved, land purchases along the White would likely be made from the state's Stewardship Fund. State purchases would be sought from willing landowners only.

Doyle said that the Stewardship Fund, whose purpose is to keep land in a natural state, is "one of the most important tools we have to protect the environment in Wisconsin."

Doyle noted that during his time in office, his administration has used $45 million in Stewardship Fund resources to protect more than 25,000 acres of land.

Flanked by Tourism Secretary Jim Holperin and DNR Secretary Scott Hassett, Doyle stressed that protecting the state's environmental resources has significant economic repercussions because so many people visit and travel through Wisconsin to see its natural areas.

For more information on the state's proposal and its effect on the White River, turn to pages 2 and 3 of this newsletter.

BAD RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION
310 Stuntz Avenue, #301
Ashland, WI 54806

The White River and its watershed are part of the larger Bad River Watershed, which encompasses 675,000 acres of land in Bayfield, Ashland, and Iron counties, draining the White, Marengo, Brunsweiler, and Potato rivers and Bear Trap and Tyler Forks creeks—all the waters that flow into the Bad River and then into Lake Superior. The Friends of the White River is a committee of the Bad River Watershed Association, Inc. The mission of the Bad River Watershed Association is to promote the healthy interconnection between the human and natural communities of the watershed by involving all citizens in maintaining the integrity of watershed systems for future generations.

Wisconsin DNR Details its White River Proposal

With the support of the Friends of the White River, the State of Wisconsin has moved forward with its proposal to create a "state acquisition zone" along the White River. This zone would include the river corridor area connecting the Bibon Swamp State Natural Area on the west and the state-owned White River Wildlife Area (just east of Hwy 13 in Ashland County) to the east. The project is being referred to as the "Proposed White River Fishery Area Expansion."

The proposed designation would allow the state to acquire, from willing landowners, a quarter-mile-wide strip of riverfront land along the White River in what is now currently a privately-owned block of land. The targeted corridor would total about 6,500 acres; in addition, the state would be able to purchase an additional 500 acres in strategic areas away from the main branch of the river, perhaps along tributaries, to help control erosion or preserve some significant natural feature or value. Finally, the proposal would allow the state to purchase conservation easements on 500 more acres in the watershed.

DNR officials have stressed that if the proposal is accepted, the DNR would approach only those landowners willing to sell to the state. Those wanting to keep their land in private ownership, or pursue some other sort of conservation option, would be left alone.

The DNR currently is circulating a draft feasibility study of the project and is accepting written comment until Sept. 27, 2004. In the next step in the process, the proposal will come before the state Natural Resources Board at its meeting on Oct. 27, 2004 for the board's consideration and approval or denial.

White River Fisheries Area Expansion Project Fact Sheet

What is the purpose of the project?
The White River watershed is knows as one of the finest brown trout fisheries in the Midwest. Brook trout also can be found in the watershed. The river has been identified in the DNR's Land Legacy Report and the Northern Rivers Initiative as a high quality stream. This project is aimed at protecting the river corridor and the high quality watershed to the river.

Who will manage the expanded White River Fisheries Area?
As a state-approved project, the DNR will have overall management authority on the project. However in the future, the state expects that citizen groups such as Trout Unlimited, local landowners and the Friends of the White River will play significant roles in advising and participating with the DNR in overall management efforts on the river.

Who requested this proposal?
State Rep. Gary Sherman, local landowners and groups such as the Friends of the White River and Trout Unlimited requested the DNR to propose the project. In August, Gov. Jim Doyle requested the DNR to complete a feasibility study for the project and present the results to the state Natural Resources Board in October.

What is the process for the DNR to acquire land and easements?
The DNR only purchases land and property easements from willing landowners. Landowners in the project area may by contacted by the DNR seeking their interest in selling land or property rights, but it is entirely up to the individual property owner whether to enter into negotiations.

If the project expansion is approved, what will happen?
It will be a long-term process to reach the full acreage goals of this project. Since the DNR only negotiates with willing property owners, it will likely take many years to achieve the overall project goal of 7,549 acres. In addition, in any given year, the DNR has limited funds for property acquisitions statewide. As a result, land acquisition priorities elsewhere in the state may affect the pace of the project on the White River.

What is the timetable for possible approval of this project?
Following a Sept. 11, 2004 public meeting on this project proposal, a two-week comment period was held. After this comment period closes, the DNR will finalize the draft Feasibility Study for this project and prepare the results for the Natural Resources Board at its October 2004 meeting.

Public meeting in Ashland draws interested citizens

A crowd of about 35 people gathered in Ashland on Saturday, Sept. 11 to hear representatives from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources outline the proposed White River Fisheries Area Expansion Project.

During the first hour, attendees gathered for one-on-one discussion with DNR fisheries, planning and real estate experts. A more formal presentation followed; Bill Heart, president of the local chapter of Trout Unlimited, outlined the past years' efforts of TU, Friends of the White River, and others to protect and preserve the White.

Dan Schuller, the DNR Northern Region Land Services Specialist, then explained the details of the project proposal, stressing that "this is not principally a public recreation project, but is rather a resource protection project."

DNR Fisheries Biologist Scott Toshner then added that the project would allow more formal study of the

White River fishery in an area of the river for which there currently is very little data.

"There is a real gap in data for this stretch regarding the movement of brown trout and the role of northern pike, among other things," he said. "Although I don't have the data, I have a strong feeling that preserving and protecting this area will help the entire river system."

Toshner added that if the proposal is accepted, he would be able to compete for state funding to begin fishery studies on this stretch of the White River between the Bibon Swamp State Natural Area and the White River Wildlife Area—a length of about 20 river miles. "I think that because of the unique features of this stretch of river, we'd do well in securing research funding," he said.

At this point, there are two remaining opportunities for citizen input to the proposal. First, the DNR will accept written comments on the proposal by Sept. 27. Those comments may be mailed to Dave Daniels, 107 Sutliff Ave, Rhinelander WI 54501 or send via email to David.Daniels@dnr.state.wi.us.

The proposal will be considered by the state Natural Resource Board at its Oct. 27, 2004 meeting at Lakewoods Resort in Cable, WI. Public input may be given at that meeting as well (see story below).

Public Input Welcome at N.R. Board Meeting Oct. 26-27

The Natural Resources Board will meet in Cable at the Lakewoods Resort on Wednesday, Oct. 27, 2004. The meeting will begin at 8:30 a.m. with the normally scheduled public comment session being at 1:00 p.m.

Those wishing to speak at that session need to call Amy J. Lemberger, Executive Staff Assistant to the NR Board, no later than 4:30 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 22.

The meeting agenda will be available two weeks prior to the meeting at this website: http://dnr.wi.gov/org/nrboard/.

In addition, the Board will offer a special listening session from 4:30–6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 26. This will be an informal setting and not require the usual pre-registration the Friday before. Those wanting to make a statement will be able to sign an appearance slip during the session. A time limit may be imposed on each speaker to accommodate as many as possible during the two hour time period.

Your state Natural Resources Board. Pictured from left to right: Steve Willett, Howard (Dan) Poulson, Christine Thomas, Gerald O'Brien, Scott Hassett, Herb Behnke, Jonathan Ela and John (Duke) Welter. The NRB sets policy for the Department of Natural Resources.

Lakewoods Resort is located on County Hwy M about eight miles east of State Hwy 63 in Cable.

Friends of the White River
a program of the
BAD RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION
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Public land and property taxes: what's the effect?

If the DNR's proposed White River Fisheries Area Expansion Project becomes a reality, that means it's likely the state will at some point purchase land along the White River from private landowners. A common worry when private land becomes public is: what will happen to the town's tax base?

The answer is: pretty much nothing.

When the Department of Natural Resources acquires land for public use, the DNR makes payments for property taxes at the same level as any other property owner. Land purchased by the DNR is removed from the tax roll, but to compensate for the tax base loss, each taxing jurisdiction (town, village, school, etc.) receives an aid payment equivalent to property taxes.

According to state statute 70.114, the DNR pays "aids-in-lieu-of-taxes" equal to property taxes that would have been paid had the land remained in private ownership. This statute has applied to land acquired by the DNR since Jan. 1, 1992.

Here's how the program works:

◆ The DNR purchases a parcel of land. At the end of the year following purchase, regular property taxes are paid. The seller pays a prorated share for the months they owned the parcel and the DNR pays the balance.

◆ In January of each subsequent year, the DNR makes an aid payment which is equivalent to or greater than the amount of property tax that would be due if the land were still in private ownership.

◆ In order to make aid calculations, the purchase price paid by the DNR is substituted for the estimated fair market value as shown on the property tax bill that was due the year of the purchase.

◆ This means that the value used to calculate the DNR's aid payment is guaranteed to be at least as high as the estimated fair market value established by local assessment.

◆ Each year the purchase price is adjusted to reflect the change in values in the taxation district where the land is located. This adjustment is based on the change in the equalized value of the taxation district. For example, if the value of the taxation district goes up 10 percent, the value of the DNR land is adjusted up 10 percent.

◆ Each year the adjusted purchase price is multiplied by the taxation district's level of assessment to determine a current substitute "assessed value." This value has been adjusted for changes in land value since the year of the purchase and for changes in the level of assessment in the taxation district.

◆ In January, the DNR sends each taxation district an aid payment. The amount of the payment is calculated just like a tax payment; the DNR multiplies the current mill rate for each taxation district by the adjusted "assessed value" of the DNR land within the district.

◆ On or before Feb. 15, the taxation district treasurer pays the appropriate share of the aid payment to each taxing jurisdiction.