

**SUBJECT: LAND ACQUISITION – NORTHERN HIGHLAND/AMERICAN LEGION STATE FOREST AND STATEWIDE NATURAL AREAS – VILAS AND IRON COUNTIES**

**FOR: DECEMBER 2011 BOARD MEETING**

**TO BE PRESENTED BY:** Richard Steffes

**SUMMARY:** The Department has an agreement to purchase 432.5 acres of land with the Board of Commissioners of Public Lands (BCPL) for \$2,000,000 in the Northern Highland/American Legion State Forest in Vilas County and 948.88 acres of land for the Statewide Natural Areas Program in Iron County for \$556,500. The item is being submitted because the purchase price exceeds \$150,000.

The Board of Commissioners of Public Lands [BCPL] was established in Article X of the State Constitution to receive and manage federal land grants for the benefit of public education. The Board is comprised of the Attorney General, the Secretary of State and the State Treasurer.

Pursuant to implementation of 2005 Act 352, passed unanimously by both houses of the legislature, the Board of Commissioners of Public Lands has sold 7,682.56 acres of land to the Department of Natural Resources, the vast majority of which are highly ranked natural areas within existing DNR project boundaries. The law directs BCPL to use the proceeds from these sales to purchase working forests for timber management and income generation for schools. The benefits of this legislation include increased timber management efficiency; increased public access; reduced forest fragmentation, increased tax receipts for local municipalities, and the permanent protection of high quality natural areas. All BCPL purchases are evaluated based on Board approved criteria in accordance with the legislation. Using this authority, BCPL has increased public access to BCPL lands by 16%, decreased non income producing wetlands by 17% and increased timber producing lands by 10%. All BCPL lands are open for hunting, fishing, trapping and public recreation.

The 432.5 acre parcel is located within the recent expansion area of the Northern Highland State Forest (NHSF), as well as a part of the Statewide Natural Areas program. The 948.88 acre parcel is known as the Lehto Bog Natural Area and is in southeast Iron County. The two parts of the transaction total 1,381.38 acres at a price of \$2,556,500.

Van Vliet Parcel:

Established in 1925 to protect the headwaters of the Wisconsin, Flambeau and Manitowish Rivers, the Northern Highland and American Legion (NHAL) State Forests include more than 232,000 acres in Vilas, Oneida and Iron Counties. The 2005 master plan for the forest states in the Purpose of the State Forest – How the statutory and other purposes and benefits of the State Forest will be realized, the Master Plan states that “Native biological diversity would be enhanced through gradual increased presence of old-growth forest communities”. Furthermore, all wetlands and lakes would receive a high level of protection. BMPs for water quality will be followed and the undeveloped shorelines would remain undeveloped.

The Van Vliet acquisition embodies the intent of the master plan by adding to the old-growth goal and protecting undeveloped wetlands and shoreline. Local landowners have sponsored the development of a nature and interpretive trail that is heavily used by local schools and nature centers. In addition, to meeting the several NHAL goals, this parcel and the Lehto Bog parcel would also become State Natural Areas, which would continue progress in achieving goals for the State Natural Areas program.

The 432.5 acre Van Vliet subject includes 9,435 feet of frontage on Van Vliet and Averill Lakes, as well as an additional 6,135 feet of frontage on four other small lakes and ponds. The property is configured as two parcels separated by interconnected Van Vliet and Averill Lakes. The parcel on the west side is about 78 acres in size with upland hardwoods and scenic views of the lakes. The remaining 354.5 acres is on the eastern side of the lakes and includes large stands of old growth hemlock and northern hardwood, as well as pockets of forested wetlands and bogs. Both parcels have access by town roads, which include utilities. There are currently parking areas and trail maps located just off these roads, provided by a local friends group. The group supports appreciation of the natural values of the property. The friends group also currently has an agreement with BCPL to maintain the walking trails and signs, and keep them open to cross-country skiing in the winter.

Van Vliet Lake is a 220-acre spring-fed lake, with a maximum depth of 23 feet and Averill Lake is a 71-acre drainage lake, with a maximum depth of 5 feet. Collectively, the lakes contain a fishery including muskie, northern pike, walleye, largemouth bass, and pan fish. Although the other lakes and ponds are not significant fish resources, they add recreational appeal and an attractive character to the remaining backland.

Lehto Bog Parcel:

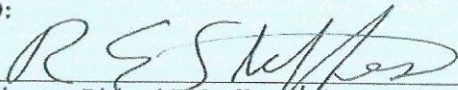
The Lehto Bog State Natural Area supports a vast peatland complex with swamp islands of dense second-growth fire-origin hemlock and white pine forest. Stands of white spruce and balsam fir are also present. A small but outstanding old-growth hemlock stand with super-canopy white and red pine occurs south of Lehto Bog. There is an abundance of dense pole sized hemlock and this is one of the few northern Wisconsin sites where hemlock is successfully regenerating outside of the major Indian reservations that support lower deer densities. Aquatic features include Lehto Bog, West Randall Lake, and Randall Creek. Northern sedge meadow, alder thicket, and swamp hardwoods are found along the riparian corridor. West of Randall Lake is a shore fen that supports a floating mat with large populations of the pink bog orchid species including the special concern, dragon's mouth orchid. The site also harbors an excellent diversity of neotropical migrants including scarlet tanager, black and white warbler, pine warbler, blackburnian warbler and Nashville warbler while the large pines surrounding the lake support bald eagles.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That the Board approve the purchase of 1,381.38 acres of land for \$2,556,500 for the Northern Highland/American Legion State Forest and for the Statewide Natural Areas Program.

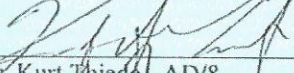
**LIST OF ATTACHED MATERIALS:**

No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Fiscal Estimate Required	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	Attached
No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Environmental Assessment of Impact Statement Required	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	Attached
No <input type="checkbox"/>	Background Memo	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Attached

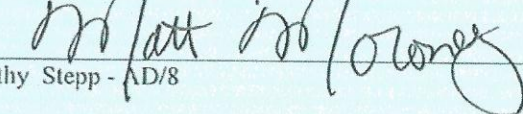
**APPROVED:**

  
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Real Estate Director, Richard E. Steffes - LF/6

11-15-11  
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Date

  
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Administrator, Kurt Thiede - AD/8

11-16-11  
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Date

  
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Secretary, Cathy Stepp - AD/8

11-16-11  
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Date

- cc: S. Miller - LF/6
- R. Steffes - LF/6
- L. Ross - AD/8
- R. Mather - FR/4
- J. Gozdziwski - Northern Region