

Wharton State Forest Motorized Recreation Plan

Stakeholder Meeting 1 – NGOs (non-profit environmental groups)

October 14, 2015

Ideas/Thoughts/Questions raised during the meeting

CLARIFY TERMS

Question: Roads that are not signposted as closed are “technically” open. What does that mean? This is giving the message it is OK to go driving down those roads. Is that correct? (Answer given: yes)

Question: Can you please define “Motorized Recreation” vs “Motorized access”? Is there a difference?

Recommendation: **Define** what is legitimate, acceptable, and legal forms of motorized recreation permitted in the forest and give list of what types of activities DO NOT constitute legitimate motorized recreation (e.g. mudding)

RULES & REGULATIONS

Question: Is this really a blank slate? There are rules in place that are important. Recreation takes second place to park rules, Pinelands regulations, federal T&E species rules, etc.

Statement: “We’re not asking for anything that’s not in the rules/regulations already.”

Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan Rules: Are we going around [breaking] these rules by allowing motorized recreation AT ALL?

3-page hand-out: “Recreation Language from the Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan revised 9-2-14”

Paragraph read aloud

“No motor vehicle other than fire, police or emergency vehicles or those vehicles used for the administration or maintenance of any public land shall be operated upon publicly owned land within the Pinelands, Other motor vehicles may operate on public lands for recreation purposes on public highways and areas on land designated prior to August 8, 1980 for such use by state and local government entities until designates as inappropriate for such use under (a) 3 below. “

Action: DEP to look at the original Wharton map to see if it pre-dates 1980s Pinelands rules. Also DEP to investigate if any later regulations override those rules (in Pinelands CMP).

Recommend: Add to our presentation goals and objectives: We must comply with DEP policy, SPS policy, statutes, Federal regulations, DEP regulations, etc.

VIOLATION OF RULES/REGS & LAW ENFORCEMENT

Recommendation: **Define** what is legitimate, acceptable, and legal forms of motorized recreation permitted in the forest and give list of what types of activities DO NOT constitute legitimate motorized recreation (e.g. mudding). What are the penalties?

Question: You permit Jeep Jamborees. If they violate the permits, should they be held liable for damages they cause? How can you make it so you can hold them liable for the damages they cause?

Statement: If a private landowner had caused that much damage to wetlands, they would be fined and have to pay for (made to) fix [restore] it. If people in vehicles cause same kinds of damage, they should be held liable to restore the habitat.

Statement: Main Issue here is enforcement.

Question: How do we increase oversight [to catch people who break the rules]?

Questions: Are there deed restrictions? Some may only permit vehicles for necessary access.

What Title 13 restrictions are there?

Suggestion: Get volunteers to take note of illegal activity. Post-game cameras that volunteers monitor.

Question: Can we have aerial surveillance? (FF helicopter? Other DEP aircraft)

Statement: There are hunters with genuine concerns (a couple of people down a road a couple times a year to their favorite hunting spot shouldn't be a problem) BUT then there are others just pretending to be hunters because they just don't want any rules and just don't ever want to follow rules. For those, you need good enforcement.

Comment: The State's Natural Areas System is designed after the Federal Wilderness Act which allows for no motorized recreation in many areas. Therefore, State Natural Areas do not permit motorized recreation (although not as strict as federal regulations)

Suggestions: You need good **enforcement, education** about rules and fines, and environmental education about the resources (so people care) Reach into schools. If you reach the kids, you can sometimes reach the parents.

Statement: Parks' law enforcement has to be on board that these offenses must be punished/stopped (cannot choose which offenses to ticket and which not to ticket).

Question: Can park police receive education about the natural resources to be protected?

Suggest: Take lessons from the process & results of making the ATV Laws: For example if you get a ticket you HAVE TO come to court, vehicle may be impounded, etc.

Suggest: Take some lessons from the Dumping task force (Don't waste our open space ...) and its successes

Also consider: Pictures of offenders on website, and other major deterrents to breaking any of these laws or rules.

Laws have to have teeth.

Other comments re: WHERE THERE SHOULD AND SHOULD NOT BE MOTORIZED RECREATION

Comment: Wilderness Campground: There should be no vehicles near there.

Suggestion: Roads with very little use right now – there's no reason to open them up for more use ... just leave them ... unknown ... undiscovered.

Suggestion: Sometimes the whole road doesn't need to be closed. Some dead-end roads that end in sensitive areas – shorten them, don't close whole road – just the end that goes into sensitive areas. Some need to be shortened. Some need to be closed.

Consider: If there should be a Roadless area.

COMMUNICATION & EDUCATION

Suggestions: At point of contact - Poster or sticker with what's permitted and what's not permitted.

Need interpretation about the valuable natural resources,

We need to let people know this forest is NOT a free-for-all.

ECO-TOURISM AND ECONOMICS

Need an economic analysis of the value of the forest to surrounding community as eco-tourism destination if it's preserved.

Resident of Hammonton stated the town is promoting eco-tourism and would post positive videos about WSF linked to their eco-tourism information. However, now if you go on YouTube, all you see are mudding videos (of activities in the forest),

From a tourism marketing perspective: Good behavior/activity can drive out bad behavior/activity just by increased presence of people who respect the rules & environment.

Suggestion: We should make our own You Tube video of good (permitted) activities in WSF to bring in more people who respect the rules and environment. "Main Street" Hammonton may be interested in helping us make the video.

SHARED SERVICES

Investigate: Shared services with municipalities.

NATURAL REOURCES ECONOMICS AND DAMAGES

Question: Is there any money available for natural resources damage from the Office of Natural Resources Damages? (A – RM explained the way NRD money is designated for specific damages)

Question: Can we get an estimate from NJDEP about how much it would cost to fix the ecological damage that has been caused? How much \$\$ environmental damage has been caused? How much \$\$ road damage has been caused. (A - We will look into this)

OTHER

DEP – We want a long-term dialog with everyone who uses the forest. We want to ensure we're employing Best Management Practices.