

## **Testimony in Support for # SF 1324**

### **Gretchen Mehmel**

Introduction – My name is Gretchen Mehmel. I have been retired from the MN DNR as the manager of the Red Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) since April 2022. I have a bachelor's degree in Wildlife Biology from the University of Minnesota.

Experience – As the manager of the Red Lake WMA and as an assistant manager in Thief River Falls, I have had considerable experience in managing both motorized and non-motorized trails.

I fully support this bill and want to make it clear that it takes nothing away from the responsible Off-Road Vehicle user. Legal trails now open to users would remain open. This is about protecting the fragile areas of our forests, making trail management easier, and helping to make using the system of trails easier for the public to follow and understand.

What this bill does by requiring signs posted for trail access, is to help users know where they are and where they can go, it helps to reduce illegal trail creation and to protect our closed forests.

Right now, north of Highway 2, in what are called Managed Forests, every trail without a sign is open. That means trails that were created illegally are open and trails that had been marked closed to protect areas from damage are open by default where signs have been removed. This is a problem that causes environmental damage to our forests and costs a lot of time and labor for DNR Forest management staff to correct in replacing signs, repairing damaged areas, and more proactively closing off closed trails where signs keep disappearing. There are photos in the testimony illustrating this damage to closed areas in the Beltrami Forest.

With this legislation, field staff can focus on making a high quality Off-Road Vehicle system, instead of having to chase down illegally made trails and trying to repair the damage done there and replacing signs that have been removed from trails that were closed due to damage.

As a DNR Wildlife manager, my job included marking trails open for motorized vehicles within the WMA where they would otherwise be closed. It also included closing trails where motorized vehicles were not appropriate due to the presence of wetlands or highly erodible soil.

If off roaders can only access signed trails, there is no incentive to remove signs from closed forests or to create illegal trails since only SIGNED access would be allowed.

Marking trails open for motorized vehicles where their use was appropriate and did not cause any damage was never a problem. These trails provided good access for people using either their highway-licensed vehicles on the WMA or both highway licensed vehicles, off-highway vehicles, and all terrain vehicles within the managed forest surrounding the WMA. These trails, as they were on high ground with soil that could sustain motorized traffic, were easy and inexpensive to maintain.

However, closing off illegal user-made motorized trails that created environmental damage across wetlands or highly erodible soils was often difficult. People using the trails illegally pulled down signs that marked the trails closed to motorized use because if there are no signs, it means the trails were automatically open to use. It required time and labor to repost the closed trails and we often had to do further work to close off the trails by placing rocks and/or dropping trees and brush across the trail in an effort to obliterate it. If only signed trails can be accessed, this will reduce illegal trails and the workload of field staff trying to repair damage instead of maintaining trails.

Beltrami Forest ATV Management Experience – I was on the team in the early 2000's that was tasked with evaluating and choosing trails to be left open or proactively closed to designate the Beltrami Forest as a Limited Forest for ATVs. The process, while driven by good data, field visits, and photographs of the trails within the forest, was not managed well from the perspective of being open and honest from the perspective of involving and informing the public.

Our original team was made up solely of DNR staff. The DNR informed the public that we were working on a trail plan and that the Beltrami Forest would be designated as a limited forest with existing trails being identified to be either continued to be open to motorized vehicles or closed to all motorized traffic. We did not share our work with the public until a scheduled meeting in Warroad where the plan was to meet with people one on one and show them the tentative trail plan on computers set up on small tables throughout the meeting room.

In the two months before the advertised meeting, rumors started running rampant in the communities surrounding Warroad, including Roseau and Thief River Falls, the homes of Polaris and Arctic Cat, manufacturers of ATVs. The rumors were that most of the trails in the forest were going to be closed. There were letters to the editor and radio spots to that effect. DNR staff members on the team made requests to write letters to the paper or go on radio programs to disabuse these rumors. **Our requests were denied.** The approach remained to diffuse the situation by meeting with people one on one to show them our plan personally.

However the rumors just grew – even to the point that the DNR planned to close Dick's Parkway which is the biggest road that runs through the forest. People started to really worry that their access to the forest was about to shut off. Talk about the meeting increased and the DNR, in anticipation of so many people had to keep finding larger venues, finally settling on the largest gathering place in Warroad – the hockey arena. Yet the tactic remained not to publicly address the rumors and still meeting with people as they came in the door at several tables with computers showing the planned trails maps.

Just a few days before the meeting, public sentiment – **without any response allowed from the DNR staff** other than everything would be answered at the meeting – was at a fever. It was announced that both Artic Cat and Polaris were going to provide busses for staff and other people to go to Warroad for the meeting. Polaris even said it planned to shut down the factory for the meeting to allow working staff to attend the meeting.

The meeting was not successful in calmly informing the public about the trail plan. In response to the huge public outcry, the DNR revamped the trail planning committee to include County Commissioners. The legislature passed a new rule that the Beltrami would not be designated as a Limited Forest, but a Managed Forest instead where all trails would be open unless posted closed. The new team went on to create a trail plan not that different from the draft plan prepared for the public meeting.

Therefore, the primary change in the Beltrami Forest plan was from having signed access only to the current Managed Forest designation where any trail without a sign would be presumed open to motorized traffic. By and large, the public using the trails followed the new rules, with notable exceptions, however. New trails created by logging or user created trails going to hunting areas, often create confusion and frequently environmental damage to the trail as they are often not in areas that can withstand heavy use. These trails then can then be difficult to close due to the labor involved in discovering and posting them closed and sometimes signs being pulled down.

A process that continually provided accurate and informed updates to the public would have been much more successful and would have resulted in what this bill is proposing now, which is a State Forest where all legal trail access is signed. This would have allowed for a better managed and protected forest and a system of ATV trails that was easily understood by all users.