



August 10, 2021

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT TIOGA BEACH SECTION, ITASCA COUNTY, MN NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

BACKGROUND

The National Park Service (NPS), in partnership with the North County Trail Association (NCTA), has completed a comprehensive planning effort for approximately 18-miles of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT), and the NPS has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the potential impacts. The EA is in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), as amended.

This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and its associated EA constitutes the record of the environmental impact analysis and decision-making process. The NPS will implement the selected alternative (Proposed Action) to: exemplify the best scenery and variety that Northeastern Minnesota has to offer; provide for the enjoyment of outdoor areas; provide world-class walking and hiking experiences; and provide a route that is safe for hikers. The Proposed Action was selected after careful analysis of potential impacts to resources and the visitor experience, and in consultation with affiliated tribes, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Minnesota State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), and review of public comments.

This document records (1) a Finding of No Significant Impact as required by NEPA; (2) a finding of may effect, but not likely to adversely effect for the northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*) and no effect for other federally listed species or their habitat as required by the Endangered Species Act, Section 7; and (3) a finding of No Historic Properties Affected as required by the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106, as it relates to the development of this Proposed Action. Implementation of this Proposed Action will require further Section 106 consultation; all described by Director's Order #12 and Handbook (NPS 2015). This FONSI is available on the National Park Service Planning, Environmental and Public Comment (PEPC) website at: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/NCTtiogabeach>.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR FEDERAL ACTION

Purpose

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to create 18-miles of new hiking trail within the *North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment* (NCT Route Adjustment) corridor authorized in the *John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act* (Dingell Act) that would meet the goals and purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System. The NPS seeks to exemplify the best scenery and variety that Northeastern Minnesota

has to offer, as well as provide for the enjoyment of outdoor areas and world-class walking and hiking experiences. Additionally, the NPS seeks to provide a route that is safe for hikers.

Need

The Proposed Action improves the NCT route in Itasca County and eliminates approximately 12-miles of existing NCT roadwalk on Highway 6. NCT roadwalks are undesirable because they do not meet the overarching purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System. Further, roadwalks are generally unsafe because hikers are walking next to a vehicular roadway.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Two alternatives were analyzed: a No Action Alternative and one Action Alternative (i.e., the Proposed Action Alternative). These alternatives are described below.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. The route would remain as approximately 12-miles of roadwalk on Highway 6. The roadwalk is generally undesirable, not scenic, and unsafe, but would continue to be used by hikers as-is. A roadwalk does not meet the goals and purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System.

Proposed Action Alternative

The Proposed Action includes approximately 18-miles of new natural-surface hiking trail that would be connected on each end to the existing NCT, from an existing trail at Tioga Beach park to Chippewa National Forest at Highway 6. For user parking, the Proposed Action would utilize existing parking lots, expand one existing parking lot with gravel, and create one new approximately 0.2-acre parking lot with gravel. The Proposed Action would include informational, wayfinding, safety, and interpretive signage. The Proposed Action would include structures over wet ground to allow hikers safe and dry passage, such as puncheon and a bridge. The Proposed Action would also include two to three primitive backcountry campsites. When the end-to-end connections to the NCT are made, approximately 12-miles of existing NCT roadwalk would be eliminated and replaced by 18-miles of new trail that would be open to recreational hiking (i.e., foot-traffic), snowshoeing/skishoeing, and backcountry camping.

Selected Alternative

The NPS has selected the Proposed Action Alternative as described and analyzed in the EA for implementation. The Proposed Action Alternative better meets the purpose and need of the park—it would meet the goals and purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System, as well as provide a route that is safer for hikers.

Preliminary Actions Considered but Dismissed

The planning team considered other potential alternatives that were later dismissed from further analysis:

- Routing through additional Minnesota DNR School Trust Lands: The Minnesota DNR's School Trust Lands are public land areas that provide a source of funding for public education. Users of School Trust Lands contribute to the trust for use of the land. This alternative is cost-prohibitive and was dismissed.
- Including Rajala/Boundary Company owned land on the route: Use of land owned by Rajala/Boundary Company was determined to not be needed in planning the route. This alternative was dismissed to maintain a smaller and more manageable number of affected landowners.

WHY THE SELECTED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

As defined in 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 1508.27, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

- 1. Impacts that may have both beneficial and adverse aspects in which on balance may be beneficial, but that may still have significant adverse impacts that require analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement.**

No significant impacts to resources were identified that require analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement. Whether taken individually or as a whole, the impacts of the selected alternative do not reach the level of a significant effect because adverse impacts associated with implementation would be temporary (i.e., lasting only during construction), negligible, minor, or minor with the implementation of best management practices and impact minimization measures. The overall beneficial impact to visitor experience, visitor safety, and increased recreational resources would be long-term. Best management practices and impact minimization measures identified in Chapter 2 and 3 of EA would further minimize any potential non-significant adverse impacts. Additional details on impacts to resources can be found in the EA.

- 2. The degree to which public health and safety are impacted.**

The EA considers public health and safety concerning the use of a hiking trail versus a roadwalk, and the potential use of natural freshwater sources. When considered with the water use guidance identified in Section 3.4 of the EA and hikers' proper long-distance hike planning, impacts from potential natural freshwater source use would be minor or negligible. Overall, the selected alternative would have a highly beneficial safety effect when compared to the No Action Alternative by eliminating the existing roadwalk (i.e., where hikers are walking next to a roadway used by vehicles) and replacing it with hiking trail.

3. **Impacts to any unique characteristics of the area (proximity to historic or cultural resources, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, wetlands or floodplains, etc.).**

No effects would occur to National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) listed properties as none are present in or visible from the action area. No adverse impacts are expected to occur to archeological resources. No effects would occur to floodplains or wild and scenic rivers as none are in the action area. The Proposed Action does not represent an irreversible conversion of potential farmland (i.e., prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance soil). The Proposed Action would not occur in critical habitat areas, and adverse impacts to special status species are not expected. Short-term and minor impacts to wetlands and waterways during construction would be minimized, and long-term adverse impacts would be negligible.

4. **The degree to which impacts are likely to be highly controversial.**

Throughout the planning and EA process, no identified environmental impacts have been deemed highly controversial. During consultation with affiliated Tribes and Bands, the SHPO, the USFWS, and the Minnesota DNR, as well as during the public comment period, there was no substantive controversy expressed about the Proposed Action.

5. **The degree to which the potential impacts are highly uncertain or involve unique and unknown risks.**

The anticipated impacts to resources, as analyzed in the EA, are not highly unique and do not involve unknown risks. Impact minimization measures and best management practices would minimize risk to the human and natural environment. Implementing the proposed new hiking trail route would eliminate a section of roadwalk, beneficially impacting recreational resources, visitor use and experience, and hiker safety.

6. **Whether the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant impacts or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.**

The selected alternative does not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The Proposed Action in the EA would not set a precedent for future actions that could have significant impacts because there have been no significant impacts identified as a potential result of the Proposed Action.

7. **Whether the action is related to other actions that may have individual insignificant impacts but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or breaking it down into smaller counterparts.**

The EA adheres to the revised CEQ regulations which came into effect September 2020. In summary, implementing the selected alternative would result in net beneficial impacts for recreational resources, visitor use and experience, and hiker safety when taking into account reasonably foreseeable actions within the action area and other development and management trends; and would not have individually or cumulatively significant impacts.

8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect historic properties in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other significant scientific, archeological, or cultural resources.**

No effects would occur to NRHP listed properties as none are present in or visible from the action area. No artifacts, archeological features, or cultural materials were identified within the Area of Potential Effect (APE) during the Phase I survey of approximately 5-miles of the Proposed Action route. Future surveys during the phased Section 106 process are expected to reveal similar results, and the route would be adjusted as needed to avoid potentially discovered resources. Should there be an inadvertent discovery of archaeological resources during construction, work would stop and those discoveries would be addressed through the appropriate compliance and consultation process. No adverse impacts are expected to occur to archeological resources.

The Minnesota SHPO concurred with a determination of No Historic Properties Affected for “phase 1.” The NPS will continue to consult with the Minnesota SHPO throughout the phased Section 106 process.

On May 20, 2021, the NPS shared the determination of No Historic Properties Affected for “phase 1” with 13 affiliated Tribes or Bands, the 1854 Treaty Authority, and the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council. As of August 2, 2021, the NPS received a response from the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe that they do “not have any known recorded sites of religious or cultural importance in this area.” The NPS will continue to involve and inform affiliated Tribes and Bands throughout the phased Section 106 process as necessary.

9. **The degree to which an action may adversely affect Endangered or Threatened species or its habitat.**

The NPS reviewed USFWS data to analyze the effects of the Proposed Action on federally listed species known or with a potential to occur within the action area. The northern long-eared bat was analyzed using the USFWS online assisted 4(d) rule determination key (d-key). The NPS submitted a may affect determination that is consistent with the 4(d) rule, and the USFWS concurred with this determination on

April 15, 2021. With the implementation of impact minimization measures, no adverse impacts are expected to special status species.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The action alternatives do not violate any Federal, State, or local environmental protection law. The NPS has complied with all Federal, State, and local laws with relevance to the selected alternative.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND AGENCY CONSULTATION

During preparation of the EA, the NPS consulted with Federal and State agencies, Tribes and Bands, interested and affected parties, and the general public. These parties are listed in Chapter 4 of the EA and are further detailed below.

Public Involvement

On May 20, 2021, the NPS-NCT released the EA for public comment on the NPS PEPC website at: <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/NCTtiogabeach>. The NPS distributed announcements by letters and/or email to associated Federal, State, and local government officials; Tribes and Bands; landowners; and individuals who had previously expressed an interest in the planning and/or EA process. The NPS coordinated with Itasca County to have a press release announcing the EA's availability and public meeting posted in the *Itasca County Spotlights* on May 20, 2021. The public was asked to review the EA and share their comments for 30-days between May 20 and June 19, 2021.

Additionally, North Country Trail Association (NCTA) staff and Arrowhead Chapter members posted a blog post regarding the Proposed Action, EA, and public meeting on the NCTA's website on May 24, 2021. On May 25, 2021, the NCTA's Minnesota Regional Trail Coordinator spoke about the Proposed Action and public meeting on the KAXE radio station which has listenership in southern Itasca County.

In coordination and partnership with Itasca County and the NCTA, the NPS hosted a public meeting regarding the Proposed Action and EA on June 3, 2021. To accommodate COVID-19 capacity requirements and social distancing, the public meeting was "hybrid," offering both in-person and virtual attendance options. There were approximately seven (7) attendees at the public meeting. The attendees were supportive of the Proposed Action, and no substantive comments were received during this meeting. During public review, seven (7) correspondences were received through the NPS PEPC website, on a comment card at the public meeting, or by e-mail.

Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office

The NPS initiated Section 106 consultation with the Minnesota SHPO on March 9, 2021. The NPS included a description of the Proposed Action, the intention to take a phased approach to

Section 106 consultation, and the Phase I Archeological Investigation Report of “phase 1.” On June 4, 2021 the Minnesota SHPO concurred with a determination of No Historic Properties Affected for “phase 1.”

The NPS will continue to consult with the Minnesota SHPO throughout the phased Section 106 process. Should there be an inadvertent discovery, work would stop and those discoveries would be addressed through the appropriate compliance and consultation.

Tribal Consultation

On February 10, 2021 the NPS sent letters and emails to 13 affiliated Tribes or Bands to describe the proposed action and invite their participation in the Section 106 process. Two Tribes responded:

- On March 22, 2021, the Upper Sioux Community Assistant Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) sent an email requesting the GIS shapefiles for the proposed route. The NPS sent the GIS shapefiles to the Assistant THPO and THPO on March 25, 2021. The NPS did not receive further response from the Upper Sioux Community.
- On March 25, 2021, the Leech Lake Band THPO contacted the NPS via phone call. The THPO clarified the Lead Agency, the action area, and requested the Phase I Archeological Investigation Report. The NPS emailed the Phase I Archeological Investigation Report to the THPO after the phone call on March 25, 2021.

On May 20, 2021, the NPS invited via letters and email the 13 affiliated Tribes and Bands, the 1854 Treaty Authority, and the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council to review and comment on the draft EA, as well as share the determination of No Historic Properties Affected for “phase 1.” One Tribe responded:

- On June 16, 2021, the Leech Lake Band THPO sent the NPS a letter via email stating: “I have reviewed the documentation. After careful consideration of our records, I have determined that the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe does not have any known recorded sites of religious or cultural importance in this area.”

The NPS will continue to involve and inform affiliated Tribes and Bands throughout the phased Section 106 process as necessary. Should there be an inadvertent discovery, work would stop and those discoveries would be addressed through the appropriate compliance and consultation.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The NPS initiated informal consultation with the USFWS on February 10, 2021. The NPS described the proposed action, provided the list of federally listed plant and animal species as generated by the USFWS Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) database (<https://ecos.fws.gov/ipac>), and requested the USFWS review. The NPS included a “no effect” determination for Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), an “unlikely to disturb” determination for bald

eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), and a “not likely to adversely affect” determination for the northern long-eared bat.

In an email on April 2, 2021, the USFWS did not have any substantial response regarding the Canada lynx and bald eagle. However, the USFWS requested that the NPS complete the northern long-eared bat d-key. The NPS completed the d-key on April 12, 2021 and submitted it with a may affect determination that is consistent with the 4(d) rule. The USFWS responded to the NPS via email on April 15, 2021 with concurrence and that the NPS has completed the consultation requirements.

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

The NPS submitted a Natural Heritage Data Request to the Division of Ecological and Water Resources on February 9, 2021. The NPS has not received the requested specific species list from the Natural Heritage Information System. The NPS did receive a letter on March 11, 2021 stating that the NPS should coordinate with the USFWS regarding bald eagles. The letter also noted some requirements under the Minnesota Environmental Policy Act (MEPA); the NPS has determined that the Proposed Action does not meet the thresholds for the MEPA process.

On February 10, 2021 the NPS sent the Division of Forestry and Division of Lands and Minerals a description of the proposed project and invited their input. The Division of Lands and Minerals provided input between February 17 and February 18, 2021. The Division of Lands and Minerals requested updated GIS shapefiles that show the avoidance of certain State Trust Lands and noted that signage encouraging hikers to stay on the trail would be “helpful” near mining stockpile areas. The Division of Land and Minerals noted there could be a potential for minor trail realignment at an unplanned and unforeseeable point in the future if the Division ever leases nearby land for mining. The NPS and NCTA sent the Division of Lands and Minerals updated GIS and the included the suggested signage into the Proposed Action description. On May 20, 2021 the NPS invited the Division of Forestry and Division of Lands and Minerals to review and comment on the draft EA. The NPS has not received further response or comment from the Division of Forestry or the Division of Lands and Minerals.

Itasca County

The NPS and NCTA presented a brief explanation of the NEPA process and the Proposed Action to the Itasca County Trails Task Force during a virtual meeting on March 11, 2021.

The NPS and NCTA coordinated with the Itasca County Land Commissioner via emails and phone calls regarding the public commenting period and public meeting. Itasca County posted the NPS press release announcing the EA’s availability in the *Itasca County Spotlights* and assisted with public meeting organization and coordination.

Itasca Soil and Water Conservation District

On February 10, 2021 the NPS sent the Itasca Soil and Water Conservation District a description of the Proposed Action and invited their input. On March 1, 2021, the NCTA contacted the

Itasca Soil and Water Conservation District via email to inquire about wetland/water crossing permits. The Itasca Soil and Water Conservation District responded on March 18, 2021 that “the permanent impact would not exceed the amount of impact allowed before needing to apply for wetland mitigation.”

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on review of the facts and analysis contained in the EA, the NPS has selected the Proposed Action Alternative, as described above, for implementation. The selected alternative does not constitute an action meeting the criteria that normally requires preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement. The Proposed Action would not have a significant effect on the human environment in accordance with section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Environmental impacts that could occur are limited in context and intensity, with general beneficial impacts to recreational resources and visitor use and experience. There are no unmitigated adverse impacts on cultural resources or federally threatened or endangered species.

No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative impacts, or elements or precedence were identified. Implementation of the actions would not violate any Federal, State, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared. The North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section in Itasca County, Minnesota will be implemented as soon as practical.

Recommended: _____
Christopher Loudenslager, Superintendent
North Country National Scenic Trail
Date

Approved: _____
Herbert C. Frost, Ph.D., Regional Director
National Park Service, DOI Regions 3, 4, and 5
Date

Attachment: Errata and Response to Comments

ATTACHMENT A: ERRATA AND RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

On May 20, 2021, the National Park Service (NPS) North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) released the Environmental Assessment (EA) for public comment. Striving to reach a broad audience, the NPS distributed announcements by letters and/or email to associated Federal, State, and local government officials; Tribes and Bands; landowners; and individuals who had previously expressed an interest in the planning and/or EA process. The NPS also announced the release of the EA via press release in the *Itasca County Spotlights*. In coordination and partnership with Itasca County and the NCTA, the NPS also hosted a public meeting regarding the Proposed Action and EA on June 3, 2021. The public was asked to review the EA and share their comments for 30-days between May 20 and June 19, 2021 related to environmental analysis of the action proposed in the study area.

This section includes both minor edits and technical revisions to the EA that resulted as a response to comments received from general commenters and consultants during the public review period. These revisions do not change the outcome of the impact analysis, nor do they affect the final decision documented in the Finding of No Significant Impact. Additionally, this section contains responses to substantive public comments on the EA. In some cases, the NPS chose to respond to some non-substantive comments received during the review period when doing so helped clarify aspects of the selected alternative.

The Errata, when combined with the EA, comprises the only amendment deemed necessary for the purposes of completing the Final EA.

ERRATA - MINOR EDITS TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Commenters noted suggested edits and changes in the EA text that may require correction or clarification. These technical revisions and additions are noted below.

Clarification or Minor Technical Edits

Table 1: Technical Revision or Change

Page/Section	Revision or Change
Cover	Updated “May 2021” to “August 2021”
Page ii-iv, Table of Contents	Page numbers were updated; added Appendix D to Table of Contents
Page i, Executive Summary Page 4, Section 1.4	Replaced “ <i>North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act (HR 1216)</i> ” with “ <i>North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment authorized in the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act</i> ”
Page 2, Section 1.0	Replaced “ <i>North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act (HR 1216)</i> ” with “ <i>North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment</i> ”

	(NCT Route Adjustment) was passed in the <i>John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act</i> (Dingell Act)”
Various	Updated “HR 1216” to “Dingell Act” or “NCT Route Adjustment” as appropriate
Page 5, Table 1	Added Surface Water Resources to Human Health and Safety row to be consistent with the included information in Section 3.4
Page 5, Table 1 Page 7 & 8, Section 2.3	Edited sentence to clarify that the primary use of hand tools during trail construction and maintenance could be occasionally supplemented with hand-held powered equipment as-needed
Page 6, Section 2.3	Changed “Chippewa National Forest at Highway 6” to “existing roadwalk on Highway 6 at Chippewa National Forest” to clarify that the Proposed Action would connect to existing roadwalk on Highway 6
Page 6, Section 2.3 Page 18, Section 3.5.2.2	Added an invasive species minimization measure; the Arrowhead Chapter intends to install PlayCleanGo® interpretation and boot brush stations
Page 7, Section 2.3	Updated the natural freshwater source sentences to be consistent with the included information in Section 3.4
Page 9, Figure 3	Updated two figure labels so it is clear where the wetland and channel crossings are located; updated figure to show the general location of known mining areas and mountain biking trails
Page 10, Section 3.1	Added sentence citing Appendix D
Page 10, Table 3	Updated the Surface Water Resources row to be consistent with the included information in Section 3.4
Page 14, Section 3.3.2	Edited the recreational resources paragraph to clarify who the “recreational users” are
Page 14, Section 3.4.1	Added cross-references to Figure 3 so it is clear where the wetland and channel crossings are located; added information that more clearly specifies the connections and water quality for the action area and potential natural freshwater sources
Page 16, Section 3.4.2	Added additional information and best management practices to provide clarity and a more comprehensive explanation regarding long-distance hikers’ potential use of natural freshwater sources

Page 23, Section 5	Included the GIS Program Manager on the List of Preparers
Page 24-25, References	Reference list was updated
Page 59, Appendix D	Added an Appendix with existing conditions photos

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS AND ISSUES

During public review of the EA, seven (7) correspondences were received through the NPS PEPC website, on a comment card at the public meeting, or by e-mail. Four (4) correspondences were from members of the Arrowhead Chapter; one (1) comment was from the North Country Trail Association (NCTA); one (1) comment was from a member of the Grand Rapids and Itasca Mountain Bike Association (GRIMBA); and one (1) comment was from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This report summarizes the comments received during the public comment period and provides NPS responses to those comments.

Five (5) of the seven (7) correspondences included statements of support for the Proposed Action. Commentors' statements of support mentioned:

- Improvements to scenery and ecological interests;
- Expansion of hiking opportunities in the local community and in Northern Minnesota;
- Increased trail system connectiveness; and
- Significant increased safety.

Other specific comments on the EA that are not already addressed or fully addressed in the "Minor Edits to the Environmental Assessment" are summarized below in concern statements. The NPS response to the concern statements are listed following each concern statement.

Economy

One commenter is a long-distance hiker who notes their support of the local economies where they travel. The commenter suggested this reasoning be "factored into the decision making."

NPS Response: The NPS has addressed this in Table 1 of the EA wherein it states: "The Proposed Action would be beneficial in the long-term to marginalized populations and other community members by creating additional trail recreational opportunities and potentially increasing modest spending in the community by trail users (NPS, 2004)." The NPS dismissed Socioeconomics and Environmental Justice from further analysis in the EA for the reasons described in Section 1.5 and Table 1 in the EA.

Consultation Updates

One comment requested the updated status of NPS consultations with Federal, State, and Tribal agencies/officials, including applicable additional mitigation measures that resulted from those consultations.

NPS Response: The NPS has addressed this in the Finding of No Significant Impact. No additional mitigation measures as a result of the consultations that are not already noted in the EA are applicable.

Cultural Resources

One comment inquired if the entire proposed 18-miles of the route would be surveyed for cultural resources.

NPS Response: Yes. The NPS is coordinating a phased approach to cultural resources review in consultation with the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and the NPS would have each phase surveyed for cultural resources and coordinated with the SHPO before construction on the next phase begins (Section 3.2 of the EA).

Invasive Vegetation

One comment requested additional information on the long-term monitoring and control/extirpation of invasive vegetation after trail construction, including whether long-term trail monitoring and maintenance activities include the identification and removal of invasive vegetation.

NPS Response: The Proposed Action includes measures that aim to minimize the potential of invasive spread by hikers, such as boot brushes at entry points and maintaining a clear/clean trail (Section 3.5.2.2 of the EA). Neither the NPS, the NCTA, or the Arrowhead Chapter would own land under the Proposed Action, and land managers would continue to manage their land in accordance with their policies and plans (Section 3.3.2.2 of the EA). The Arrowhead Chapter volunteers have interest in identifying, monitoring, and/or controlling/extirpating invasive vegetation, if ever directed to do so by a landowner/manager and at a landowner/manager's direction.

Wetland and Water Crossings

One comment requested the identification of the number, type, and location of wetlands and streams crossed by the Proposed Action.

NPS Response: At this time, one wetland and one channel would be crossed by the Proposed Action. The number, type, and location of wetlands and waterways crossed by the Proposed Action are detailed in Section 3.4 of the EA. For the Final EA, the NPS has updated Figure 3 to better show the location of these crossings and included existing site photos of these locations in Appendix D.

Mining Areas

One comment requested the identification of “old and active mining stockpile areas that are in the immediate watershed/s upstream of proposed freshwater sources for trail hikers/campers.”

NPS Response: For the Final EA, the NPS has updated Figure 3 to show the location of known areas with mining use. These locations are downstream of the potential freshwater sources.

Freshwater Sources

One comment requested more information on the water quality of the potential natural freshwater sources. The comment requested the inclusion of applicable advisory information on applicable agency websites and trail signage.

NPS Response: Potential natural freshwater sources near the potential campsites are small, generally unnamed streams and ponds that are connected via channels or streams to the major waterbodies surrounding the action area. Watershed monitoring in 2015 by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency found the major waterbodies surrounding the action area to meet the pollution parameters for aquatic recreation and “fully support” recreation activities, including swimming (MPCA, *Mississippi River (Headwaters) Watershed Monitoring and Assessment Report*, 2017). Neither the NPS or the NCTA manage an official long-distance hiking program because of the vast variety of landowners, managing authorities, rules, and regulations across the NCT. The NPS and NCTA would direct long-distance hikers and campers who might use the natural freshwater sources near the potential campsites to contact the local NCTA Chapters and land managers regarding water availability, permission, and use. The NCTA website for hike-planning directs to the American Hiking Society guidelines for water use, including purification methods and standards (e.g., boiling, filtering, chlorine drops, etc.). If applicable, the NCTA would post known or reported water use advisories in their trail alerts, and the Arrowhead Chapter would include it on signage at entry points. For the Final EA, the NPS has updated Section 3.4 with this information.

Mountain Biking

One comment asked about the Proposed Action’s connection to the Tioga Recreation Area Mountain Biking Trails. The commentor noted that, while the area is open to hiking and camping, they do not want to “encourage hiking on the bike trails due to safety concerns.” The comment also inquired if biking would be allowed on the proposed new NCT route.

NPS Response: The nature and purpose of the NCT is to be a walking and hiking trail (NPS, *North Country National Scenic Trail Foundation Document*, 2015), and it would not be constructed to accommodate biking. Users of the proposed new NCT route could use the existing parking lot and pedestrian crossing at Tioga Beach that is currently used by

mountain bikers and other Tioga Beach recreation users. The mountain biking trails veer south, while signage would direct NCT hikers west, away from potential hiker/biker interactions that could cause safety concerns. For the Final EA, the NPS has updated Figure 3 to show the location of the mountain biking trails.

Usage Statistics

One comment asked if there is information available for the level/numbers of foot-traffic on the NCT.

NPS Response: Neither the NPS or the NCTA maintain quantified numbers or statistics on the level of NCT usership; the NCT is a multi-State trail with inconsistent hours of operation and innumerable trailheads, entry points, and parking lots throughout its length. Trail use patterns indicate that the users would primarily be local or regional residents who likely already utilize the recreational resources in the region (Section 3.3.3.2 of the EA).

OUT OF SCOPE COMMENTS

There were no comments that are outside of the scope, or purpose and need for the Proposed Action.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

North Country National Scenic Trail
Lowell, MI



North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section, Itasca County, MN Environmental Assessment



August 2021

Executive Summary

The National Park Service (NPS) – North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) proposes to construct approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail in Itasca County, Minnesota (hereafter the Proposed Action). The Proposed Action would be connected on each end to the existing NCT. It would be a natural surface footpath that would include NCT signage, structures for passage over wet ground or water, gravel parking lots, and primitive backcountry campsites. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to create new hiking trail that would meet the goals and purpose of the *North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment* authorized in the *John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act*, the NCT, and the National Trails System. The Proposed Action is needed to improve the NCT route in Itasca County and eliminate approximately 12-miles of existing NCT roadwalk on Highway 6. The NPS seeks to exemplify the best scenery and variety that Northeastern Minnesota has to offer, as well as provide for the enjoyment of outdoor areas and world-class walking and hiking experiences.

This Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluates two alternatives: the No Action Alternative and the Proposed Action Alternative. Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented and the existing route would remain as approximately 12-miles of NCT roadwalk. Under the Proposed Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would be implemented and 12-miles of NCT roadwalk would be eliminated and replaced by 18-miles of new trail.

This EA has been prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide a decision-making framework as follows: 1) assess a reasonable range of alternatives to meet the underlying purpose of the proposed action; 2) evaluate potential issues and impacts to the natural and cultural resources of the park; and 3) identify required mitigation measures designed to lessen the degree or extent of any potential adverse environmental impacts. Agency staff and the public identified resources that could be affected by the actions described within the alternatives. The resources include: cultural resources, land use and recreation resources, surface water resources, vegetation, wildlife, and visitor use and experience. Other resources were dismissed because an interdisciplinary team determined the Proposed Action would result in no or negligible impacts. After analyzing potential impacts, the NPS identified no significant impacts associated with implementing the Proposed Action Alternative.

Public Comment

This EA will be available for 30 days of public review and a public meeting will be held, as detailed in a Notice of Availability in Itasca County Spotlights (<https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/>). The NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) site provides access to current plans and related documents on public review. Users of the site can submit comments for documents available for public review. If you wish to comment on the EA, you may post comments online at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/NCTtiogabeach> or mail comments by **June 19, 2021** to: Steph Liguori, National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail, 318 East Main Street, Suite K, Lowell, MI 49331.

Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

ON THE COVER: Arrowhead Chapter volunteers, photograph provided by Matt Davis (NCTA)

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1.0 Introduction

The North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) was authorized in the National Trails System Act of 1968, as amended (16 United States Code [USC] § 1241 *et seq.*), with the National Park Service (NPS) authorized as its Administrator. The National Trails System Act authorized a national system of trails to provide for ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs and to promote the preservation and enjoyment of and public access to outdoor areas and historic resources of the United States. National Scenic Trails, as established in Section 5 of the National Trails System Act, are “*extended trails so located as to provide for maximum outdoor recreation potential and for the conservation and enjoyment of the nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which such trails may pass.*”

The nature and purpose of the NCT is provide a non-motorized trail offering world-class walking and hiking experiences within a protected railway and landscape through the northern heartlands of America. The NCT has the following fundamental resources and values: (1) promote trail opportunities and experiences for those seeking the respite of the outdoors, (2) provide connectivity and protection of significant natural and cultural resources, stories, and viewsheds, (3) encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance, and management of the NCT, where appropriate, and (4) maintain collaborative partnerships with Federal, State, and local land managers, nonprofit organizations, and corporate and private landowners. (NPS, 2015).

The NCT meanders for approximately 4,600 miles through eight States, from central Vermont to Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota (Figure 1). When completed, it will be the longest footpath in the United States, linking and showcasing a network of nationally significant scenic, historic, natural, and cultural features, as well as communities, along its route. It includes a diversity of scenery, landscapes, and terrain. The NCT exists as much for the enjoyment of the casual walker as it does for the challenge of hikers who travel its entire length, providing outstanding opportunities for recreation, education, inspiration, solitude, and enjoyment.



Figure 1: North Country National Scenic Trail Overview Map

While the overall NCT is administered by the NPS, very little of it is on lands directly owned and managed by the NPS. Most of the existing NCT is on public lands managed by the US Forest Service, or State or local governments. Other sections are on private or corporate lands, where the owners have agreed to allow the NCT on their land. Many miles of the trail are co-located on sections of trails that are managed by regional trail Affiliates, such as the Finger Lakes Trail Conference in New York and the Buckeye Trail Association in Ohio. Construction and maintenance of the NCT would not be possible without the efforts and cooperation of the NPS' partner agencies and organizations; the NCT is primarily built and maintained through a

partnership with the non-profit North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and approximately 30 NCTA volunteer Chapters.

In 2019, the *North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment* (NCT Route Adjustment) was passed in the *John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act* (Dingell Act), which changed the Congressionally authorized NCT corridor in Northeastern Minnesota. This authorization allows the NCT to be located on a route that exemplifies the best scenery, variety, and hiking experience the North Country of Minnesota has to offer, as well as avoids extensive wetlands and other obstacles that were impeding trail development in the former corridor (NPS, 2004).

1.1 Scope of the Project

As part of the new route authorized under the Dingell Act, the NPS is proposing approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail in Itasca County, Minnesota (hereafter the Proposed Action). A detailed description of the Proposed Action is in Section 2.3.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was previously completed in 2004 for the broad NCT route in Northeastern Minnesota that is authorized in the Dingell Act (Figure 2). The Proposed Action is encapsulated within the 2004 EA, but the NPS has identified it as requiring additional, site-specific NEPA review. The 2004 EA is incorporated by reference in this tiered EA as applicable and appropriate ([2004 Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment and EA \(nps.gov\)](#)) (NPS, 2004).

This tiered EA has been prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide the decision-making framework that: (1) analyzes a reasonable range of alternatives to meet the objectives of the proposal, (2) evaluates potential issues and impacts on resources and values, and (3) identifies mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts.

1.2 Purpose and Need for Action

1.2.1 Purpose

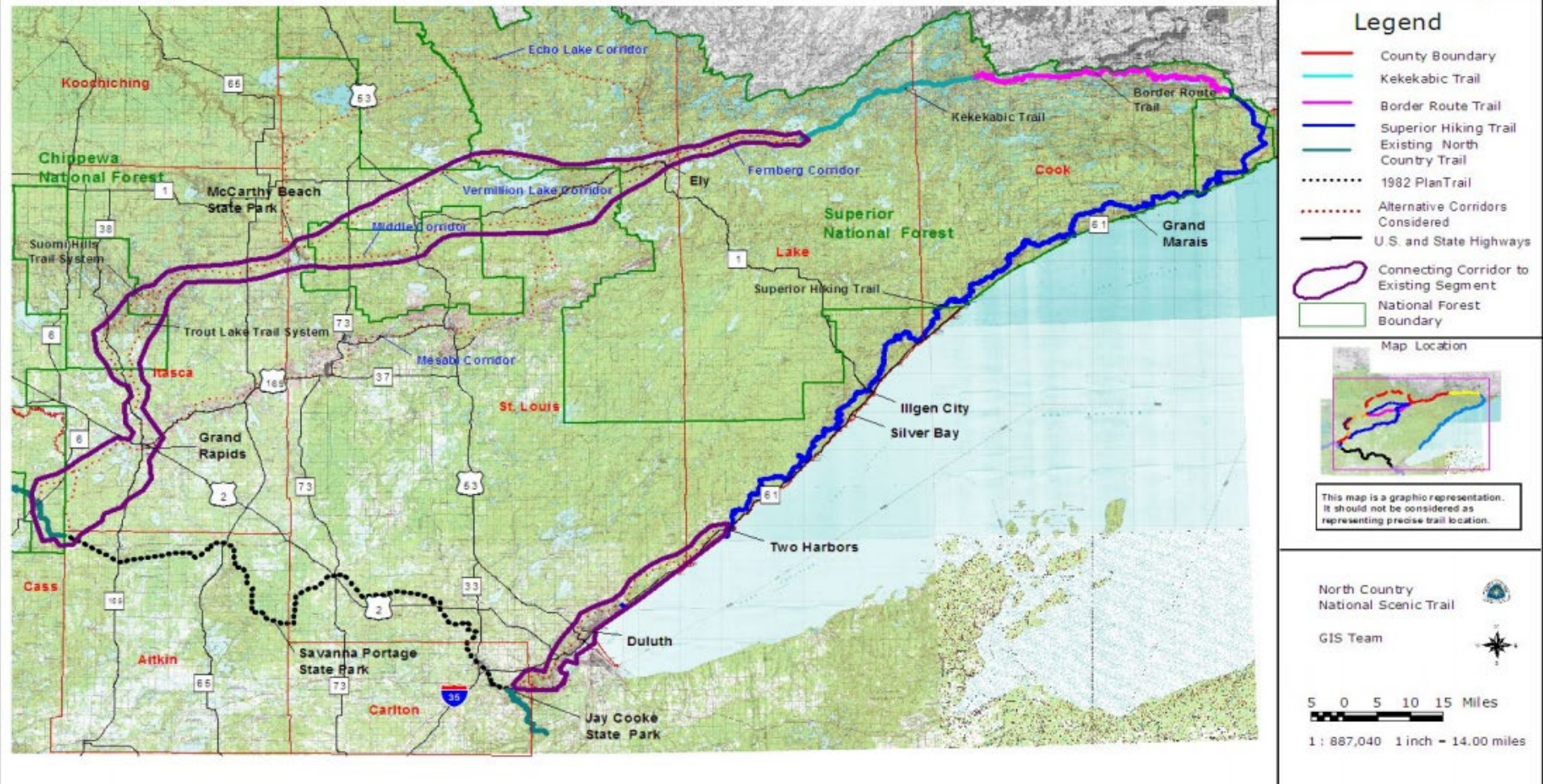
The purpose of the Proposed Action is to create 18-miles of new hiking trail within the corridor authorized in the Dingell Act that would meet the goals and purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System. The NPS seeks to exemplify the best scenery and variety that Northeastern Minnesota has to offer, as well as provide for the enjoyment of outdoor areas and world-class walking and hiking experiences. Additionally, the NPS seeks to provide a route that is safe for hikers.

1.2.2 Need

The Proposed Action is needed to improve the NCT route in Itasca County and eliminate approximately 12-miles of existing NCT roadwalk on Highway 6. NCT roadwalks are undesirable because they do not meet the overarching purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System. Further, roadwalks are generally unsafe because hikers are walking next to a roadway that is typically utilized by vehicles.

Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment Preferred Alternative Map

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



January 14, 2004

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Figure 2: Northeastern Minnesota Route Identified in 2004 EA

1.3 Project Objectives

Objectives are more specific statements of purpose that provide an additional basis for comparing the effectiveness of alternatives in achieving the desired outcomes of the action (NPS, 2015). All alternatives carried forward for detailed analysis must meet all objectives in no small degree and must resolve the purpose of and need for action. The planning team identified the following objectives:

- Exemplify the best scenery and variety of Northeastern Minnesota;
- Provide of the enjoyment of outdoor areas and outdoor recreation opportunities;
- Improve hiker safety by eliminating roadwalk; and
- Ensure land manager cooperation, agreement, and involvement

1.4 Relationship to Existing Plans and Programs

By incorporating information developed in ongoing research, implementation of the Proposed Action will assist in achieving NCT objectives outlined in the following documents:

- National Trails System Act of 1968, as amended (16 USC § 1241 *et seq.*)
- North Country National Scenic Trail Comprehensive Plan for Management and Use (NPS, 1982)
- Northeastern Minnesota Route Assessment and Environmental Assessment (NPS, 2004)
- Foundation Document, North Country National Scenic Trail, ND, MN, WI, OH, PA, NY (NPS, 2015)
- North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment authorized in the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (2019)
- NCTA 2020-2023 Strategic Plan Priority Objectives (NCTA, 2020)

1.5 Impact Topics

Issues related to cultural and historic resources, land use and recreation resources, vegetation, wildlife, visitor use and experience, and water resources are analyzed in detail in this EA. Resources were retained for detailed analysis either because (a) they are central to the proposal or of critical importance, (b) analyzing them will inform the decision making process, or (c) because the environmental impacts associated with the issue are a significant point of contention.

Issues related to air quality; floodplains; geology, topography, and soils; human health and safety; socioeconomics and environmental justice; soundscapes; and wilderness have been dismissed from detailed analysis because they are not central to the proposal, do not assist with making a reasoned choice between alternatives, or are not a point of contention.

Table 1 summarizes which topics were retained or dismissed and includes the rationale for dismissal.

Table 1. Impact Topics Retained or Dismissed

Impact Topic	Retain	Dismiss	Rationale for Dismissal
Air Quality		x	Itasca County is in attainment with the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for all criteria pollutants ¹ (EPA, 2021). Construction would primarily involve the use of hand tools; hand-held powered equipment use would be as-needed. No stationary fuel-burning equipment is associated with the Proposed Action. Therefore, this topic was dismissed from further analysis.
Cultural Resources	x		
Floodplains		x	No occupancy, modification, or development of floodplains would occur; therefore, this topic was dismissed (FEMA, 2021).
Geology, Topography, and Soils		x	Northeastern Minnesota has been affected by several major periods of volcanism, mountain-building, deformation, erosion, sedimentation, and ice/glacier movement throughout geologic time. Today, the Upper Mississippi River Basin is characterized by gentle topography (NPS, 2004). Thick glacial drift covers bedrock over most of the action area (MN DNR, 2021a). Soils in the action area are generally sandy or silt loams that are well drained. Some of the soils are identified as prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance; however, the NCT does not represent an irreversible conversion of potential farmland ² (NRCS, 2019; NPS, 2004). During construction, ground disturbance would be shallow and generally limited to the surface level. In the long-term, the trail tread would be compacted from hiker foot-traffic; however, this would be negligible when compared to the existing soil compaction in the action area from timber and mining operations and other outdoor recreation activities. Therefore, this topic was dismissed from further analysis.
Groundwater		x	Groundwater resources would not be encountered or changed; therefore, this topic was dismissed
Human Health and Safety		x	The potential effects and benefits to hiker health and safety is addressed under Visitor Use and Experience and Surface Water Resources; therefore, this topic was dismissed.
Land Use and Recreation Resources	x		
Socioeconomics and Environmental Justice ³		x	There would not be an impact to the employment, occupations, income, or tax base of the surrounding area. Significant concentrations of marginalized populations are not expected in the surrounding area; approximately 93% of Itasca County is White-alone and approximately 84% of children are not in poverty (US Census Bureau, 2019). The Proposed Action would be beneficial in the long-term to marginalized populations and other community members by creating additional trail recreational opportunities and potentially increasing modest spending in the community by trail users (NPS, 2004). Therefore, this topic has been dismissed from further analysis.
Soundscapes		x	Construction would primarily involve the use of hand tools; hand-held powered equipment use would be as-needed. Any increase in noise would be negligible when compared to existing recreational and louder noises in the area, such as timber harvesting, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), and hunting. Therefore, this topic was dismissed from further analysis.
Surface Water Resources	x		
Wildlife	x		
Vegetation	x		
Visitor Use and Experience	x		
Visual Resources		x	The potential effects and benefits to hiker visuals is addressed under Visitor Use and Experience; therefore, this topic was dismissed.
Wilderness		x	No federally-designated wilderness areas (i.e., Wilderness Act of 1964) are present in the action area; therefore, this topic was dismissed (NPS, 2020).

¹ As required by the Clean Air Act of 1970 and its amendments, the EPA has established National Ambient Air Quality Standards for six criteria pollutants (i.e., pollutants that are considered harmful to public health and the environment) (40 CFR 50). A geographic region where the pollutant “levels” are in compliance with the Standards is considered to be “in attainment.”

² “Prime farmland” is federally-designated land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing crops and is available for such uses. “Farmland of statewide importance” is State-designated land that almost meets the requirements for prime farmland and that could produce high yields of crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming methods (NRCS, n.d.). With some exceptions, Federal projects that irreversibly convert farmland to non-agricultural uses are subject to the Farmland Protection Policy Act, even if the land is not currently used for cropland.

³ EO 12898, *Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations*, directs Federal agencies to identify whether their actions would cause disproportionate impacts to Environmental Justice communities (i.e., places where there are high concentrations of minority and low-income populations).

2.0 Alternatives

This EA analyzes a No Action Alternative and one Action Alternative. This chapter describes the alternatives in detail, while impacts associated with the actions proposed under each alternative are outlined in Chapter 3: Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences. In accordance with 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1502.14, this section also identifies the alternative that the NPS initially considered, but dismissed.

2.1 *Elements Common to all Alternatives*

The NCT is by law a non-motorized trail and is administered by the NPS and managed by many public and private partners as a trail suitable for foot travel only. This includes sections that are identified as roadwalk (i.e., hikers are walking by foot next to a road).

2.2 *No Action Alternative*

Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. The route would remain as approximately 12-miles of roadwalk on Highway 6. The roadwalk is generally undesirable, not scenic, and unsafe, but would continue to be used by hikers as-is. A roadwalk does not meet the goals and purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System.

While the No Action Alternative would not satisfy the purpose and need of the Proposed Action, this alternative was retained to provide a comparative baseline against which to analyze the effects of the Proposed Action Alternative, as required under Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 CFR 1502.14). The No Action Alternative serves as a benchmark against which the effects of the Proposed Action (i.e., the Proposed Action Alternative) can be evaluated.

2.3 *Proposed Action Alternative*

The Proposed Action includes approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail that would be connected on each end to the existing NCT, from an existing trail at Tioga Beach park to existing roadwalk on Highway 6 at Chippewa National Forest, as illustrated in **Figure 3**. The proposed trail would be natural surface tread (i.e., no pavement, gravel, or concrete) with a prism⁴ approximately 4 feet wide and 8 feet high. Sections through areas of private ownership would only be established with the voluntary permission of the landowner, and the NPS would work with land management agencies, the NCTA, and volunteers to construct, operate, and use the Proposed Action in accordance with landowner policies and plans (see Section 3.3.2.2).

For user parking, the Proposed Action would utilize existing parking lots, expand one existing parking lot with gravel, and create one new approximately 0.2 acre parking lot with gravel in an existing grassy open area near the intersection of Northwoods Trail (an unpaved residential road) and County Road 17. The Proposed Action would include informational signage at parking lots and entry points that communicate wayfinding (e.g., maps), user restrictions (i.e., foot-traffic only), safety information (e.g., hunting in area), and/or invasive species management (e.g., PlayCleanGo® interpretation and boot brush stations). There would also be NCT wayfinding and interpretative signage along the trail, including interpretation of an unused mining water control feature (see Section 3.2). Where necessary, signage encouraging hikers to

⁴ The trail prism is the height and width of the cleared area above and to the sides of the trail and tread surface.

stay on the trail would be installed to minimize hikers' straying, such as near mining stockpile areas.

The Proposed Action would also include structures over wet ground to allow hikers safe and dry passage, such as puncheon⁵ and a bridge. At least 20-feet of continuous puncheon would be constructed over wet ground, as well as approximately 400-feet of puncheon over a known wetland and an approximately 40-feet long A-frame bridge over a former man-made log-driving channel. The proposed puncheon and bridge would be elevated, allowing for the free-movement of water and small and/or aquatic animals underneath (see Sections 3.4 and 3.5). Construction work would be avoided during precipitation events to minimize potential runoff or sedimentation into nearby water bodies (see Section 3.4).

The Proposed Action would also include primitive backcountry campsites. While six potential locations for campsites have been identified, only two or three of these would be constructed depending on feasibility and landowner input. The campsites would contain space for tents, a fire pit (if feasible and permissible), a table bench⁶, and a wilderness toilet (i.e., a pit with a fiberglass riser/seat). Each campsite would be approximately 100 square feet, although only the tent space and fire pit area would be cleared of vegetation. The campsites would be within walking distance to a potential natural freshwater source (e.g., stream or pond), though not directly adjacent. The NPS and NCTA would direct long-distance hikers and campers who might use natural freshwater sources to contact local NCTA Chapters and land managers about water use, as well as to the American Hiking Society guidelines for water use (NCTA, 2021; AHS, 2021). If applicable, the NCTA would post known or reported water use advisories in their trail alerts, and the Arrowhead Chapter would include it on signage at entry points (see Section 3.4).

The Proposed Action Alternative would be designed to avoid or minimize impacts to natural and cultural resources to the extent possible. Prior to construction, the NPS, NCTA, or landowner would obtain all required Federal, State, and local permits and approvals necessary, including the appropriate wetland and water crossing permits (see Section 3.4.2.2). All requirements and limitations in the obtained permits would be adhered to. Specific recommendations identified in consultations with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to minimize or avoid impacts to special status species would be implemented (see Sections 3.5 and 3.6). Should there be an inadvertent discovery of archaeological resources during construction, work would stop and those discoveries would be addressed through compliance with the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (ARPA) and in consultation with the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and relevant Tribes and/or Bands (see Section 3.2).

The NPS would coordinate design and construction in partnership with the NCTA and the NCTA's volunteer Arrowhead Chapter. The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter anticipate constructing the trail, campsites, and parking lots in a phased approach over the next three to five years, starting construction in late-summer 2021. Existing vehicle cross-roads would be used during construction for access to minimize off-road disturbance and travel. The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter would conduct all trail construction activity in accordance with the NPS' *North Country Trail Handbook for Planning, Design, Construction, and Maintenance* (NPS, 2019). The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter would primarily use hand tools during construction. Some hand-held powered equipment (e.g., chainsaws, self-propelled mowers) could also be used, as needed. The Arrowhead Chapter volunteers would clean equipment, boots, and clothing before starting and after leaving each workday to minimize the potential for invasive species spread (see

⁵ Puncheon are short-span footbridges or a series of connected short-span footbridges usually secured to the ground with rebar and usually slightly elevated on sills to provide a dry crossing over wet, but not inundated, ground.

⁶ A table bench is a single bench with a connected and elevated table, e.g., half of a picnic table.

Section 3.5.2.2). Construction would include the removal of brush and small saplings, but would circumvent any standing trees that are 3 inches diameter at breast height (dbh) and greater to avoid the felling of those trees to the extent possible. If a tree is identified for removal, such as those hazardous to hiker safety, it would be removed outside of the Northern long-eared bat's (NLEB) pup season of June 1 through July 31 (see Section 3.5).

When the end-to-end connections to the NCT are made, approximately 12-miles of existing NCT roadwalk would be eliminated and replaced by 18-miles of new trail. The Proposed Action would be open to recreational hiking (i.e., foot-traffic), snowshoeing/skishoeing, and backcountry camping. In the long-term, the trail and campsites are expected to be utilized by local day-hikers and long distance through-hikers. Post-construction, the trail and campsites would be maintained and monitored in partnership with the NCTA and the Arrowhead Chapter. Common monitoring and maintenance activities include maintaining the trail prism (primarily with hand tools, sometimes with hand-held powered equipment if needed), removing new trip hazards from the trail tread (such as a fallen tree), maintaining NCT signage, and monitoring the wilderness toilets and cleanliness at campsites.

2.4 *Alternatives Considered but Dismissed*

Table 2 summarizes the actions initially considered as potential alternatives but were later dismissed from further analysis.

Table 2: Alternatives Considered but Dismissed from Further Review

Alternatives Considered	Reason for Dismissal
Routing the trail through additional Minnesota DNR School Trust Land	The Minnesota DNR's School Trust Lands are public land areas that provide a source of funding for public education. Users of School Trust Land, primarily iron mining and timber harvesting companies, contribute to the trust for use of the land. This alternative was dismissed for the Proposed Action due to the cost of using School Trust Lands.
Including Rajala/Boundary Company owned land on the route	Rajala/Boundary Company is a timber company that owns some land in the vicinity of the action area. Use of their land was determined to not be needed in planning the route, and this alternative was dismissed for the Proposed Action to maintain a smaller and more manageable number of affected landowners.

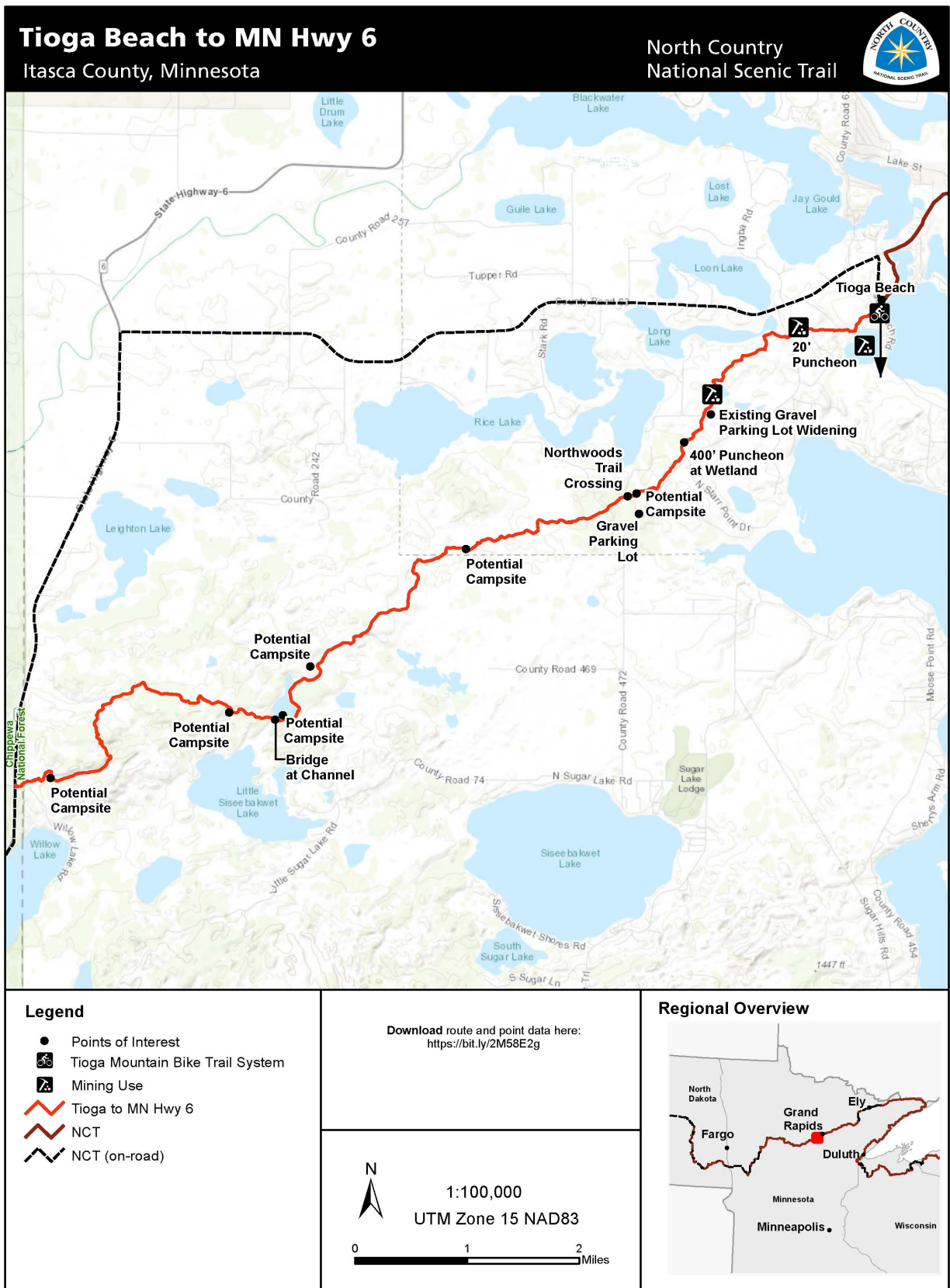


Figure 3: Proposed Action Map

3.0 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the affected environment and documents the existing conditions of the action area. These descriptions serve as a baseline for understanding the resources potentially impacted were the alternatives described enacted. Existing condition photos are provided in Appendix D to this EA. This chapter analyses the environmental consequences or “impacts” of the no-action alternative and action alternative for each resource. The resource topics presented in this section correspond to the environmental issues and concerns identified during internal scoping.

In accordance with the CEQ regulations, the environmental consequences analysis includes the direct and reasonably foreseeable impacts on resources as a result of the proposed action (40 CFR 1502.16). The degree of the impact is assessed in the context of the park’s purpose and significance and any resource-specific context that may be applicable (40 CFR 1508.27). The methods used to assess impacts vary depending on the resource being considered, but generally are based on a review of pertinent literature and studies, information provided by on-site experts and other agencies, professional judgment, and NPS and NCTA staff knowledge and insight.

According to revised CEQ regulations: *Effects* or *impacts* means changes to the human environment from the proposed action or alternatives that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the proposed action or alternatives, including those effects that occur at the same time and place as the proposed action or alternatives and may include effects that are later in time or farther removed in distance from the proposed action or alternatives. A summary of the environmental consequences for each alternative is provide in Table 3, with further description provided in the following resource sections.

Table 3: Summary of Environmental Consequences

Resource Area	No Action Alternative	Proposed Action Alternative
Cultural Resources	No effects	No adverse impact, with some localized and long-term benefit realized through interpretation
Land Use and Recreation Resources	No changes or effects to land use or ownership; benefits from increased recreational resources would not be realized; a long-term and adverse impact to NCT recreational resources when compared to the Proposed Action Alternative	No changes in land ownership would occur; localized, long-term, and minor potential impacts to landowner policies and plans; long-term, beneficial effect on recreational resources
Surface Water Resources	No effects	Short-term and minor impacts during construction work in a wetland and channel; negligible long-term impacts post-construction; minor or negligible impacts from potential natural freshwater source use with guidance and hikers’ proper planning
Wildlife	No effects	Localized, short- and long-term, minor impacts from construction and trail user disturbance; no adverse impacts to special status species with the implementation of agency recommendations and general minimization measures

Vegetation	No effects	Localized, short- and long-term, minor impacts from construction and trail user disturbance; no adverse impacts to special status species with the implementation of agency recommendations and general minimization measures
Visitor Use and Experience	No changes or effects to visitor use and experience; benefits to NCT users from improved scenery, enjoyment, and safety would not be realized; long-term and adverse impact to NCT hiker use and experience when compared to the Proposed Action Alternative	Long-term and highly beneficial by providing NCT hikers with access to 18 new miles of continuous trail with improved hiking experiences, scenery, and safety

3.2 Cultural Resources

3.2.1 Affected Environment

Cultural resources are:

- *historic properties* listed in or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) as defined by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA);
- *archaeological resources* as defined by ARPA; *sacred sites* as defined by Executive Order (EO) 13007 to which access is afforded under the American Indian Religious Freedom Act;
- *cultural items* as defined by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA); and
- *collections and associated records* as defined by regulations for Curation of Federally Owned and Administered Archeological Collections (36 CFR 79).

No historic properties listed in the NRHP are located within the action area for the Proposed Action, nor are any visible from the Proposed Action. The closest NRHP-listed property is a circa-1895 schoolhouse within the city of Grand Rapids, approximately 4.5-miles from Tioga Beach and across the Mississippi River (NPS, 2021).

On behalf of the NPS, Commonwealth Heritage Group conducted a Phase I archeological investigation and survey of approximately 5-miles of the proposed route, from Tioga Beach Road to Northwoods Trail (Commonwealth Heritage Group, 2020). The Area of Potential Effect (APE)⁷ for the Phase I included all areas along the approximately 5-mile section that could be impacted by the Proposed Action development: a 20 feet wide linear corridor, three 0.16 acre potential locations for a backcountry campsite, one approximately 0.2 acre area for a potential parking area, and one 400-feet long wetland crossing for proposed puncheon.

During the initial desktop investigations, Commonwealth Heritage Group identified 10 previously reported archeological sites within 1-mile of the APE. Two of these sites were identified as being adjacent to the APE: Site 21IC0060 (pre-contact cultural material) and Site 21IC0108 (pre-contact ceramics).

Archeologists from Commonwealth Heritage Group conducted shovel testing and a pedestrian survey between November 3-5, 2020. No artifacts, archeological features, or cultural materials

⁷ The APE is “. . .the geographic area or areas within which an undertaking may directly or indirectly cause alterations in the character or use of historic properties, if any such properties exist. The area of potential effects is influenced by the scale and nature of an undertaking and may be different for different kinds of effects caused by the undertaking.” (36 CFR 800.16(d))

were identified within the APE during the survey. An unused mining water control structure was identified outside the APE.

Section 106 of the NHPA allows for the phased identification and evaluation of cultural resources when the project under consideration consists of corridors (36 CFR 800.4(4)(b)). The NPS is coordinating a phased approach to cultural resources review in consultation with the Minnesota SHPO under Section 106. The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter anticipate constructing the Proposed Action in a phased approach over the next three to five years, and the NPS would have each phase surveyed for cultural resources and coordinated with the SHPO before construction on the next phase begins. Future surveys are expected to reveal similar results to the first 5-mile section.

The NPS is also consulting with Native American Tribes and Bands that have an interest in the Proposed Action under Section 106. Please refer to Section 4.4 for more details on the consultations with Native American Tribes and Bands.

3.2.2 Environmental Consequences

3.2.2.1 No Action Alternative

No effects on cultural or historical resources would occur from the Proposed Action under this alternative.

3.2.2.2 Proposed Action Alternative

As no NRHP-listed properties are present in or visible from the action area, no effects would occur to NRHP-listed properties under this alternative.

No artifacts, archeological features, or cultural materials were identified within the APE during the survey of approximately 5-miles of the Proposed Action's route. The mining water control feature is not in the APE and would not be directly impacted by the Proposed Action development. The NPS proposes to include interpretative signage on the trail tread that describes that feature and highlights the mining heritage of the local area. Interpretation of this feature would have a minor beneficial effect by providing historical context and knowledge to the public.

Future surveys during the phased process are expected to reveal similar results, and the Proposed Action route would be adjusted as needed to avoid potentially discovered resources. Should there be an inadvertent discovery of archaeological resources during construction, work would stop and those discoveries would be addressed through compliance with ARPA and consultation with the Minnesota SHPO and relevant Tribes and/or Bands. The NPS is consulting with the Minnesota SHPO on this phased process, and the NPS would continue to consult with the SHPO and interested Tribes throughout the process. Therefore, no adverse impacts are expected to occur to archeological resources because of the Proposed Action.

Overall, no adverse impacts to cultural and historic resources are anticipated, with some localized and long-term benefit realized through potential interpretation and education opportunities.

3.3 Land Use and Recreation Resources

3.3.1 Affected Environment

The Proposed Action would be routed through land owned and/or managed by the Itasca County Land Department, UPM-Blandin, Minnesota DNR, private landowners, and the US Forest Service (USFS). The Proposed Action does not intersect lands ceded in the 1854 Treaty with the Lake Superior Chippewa Indians; however, the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Grand Portage Band, Bois Forte Band, and 1854 Treaty Authority were included in the NPS' outreach for the Proposed Action (see Section 4.4).

The land managed by Itasca County is tax forfeited land that has been acquired by the State, and the County is granted management of such land under Chapter 282 of Minnesota Statutes. Most of the tax forfeited land in Itasca County is open to the public for outdoor and dispersed recreation. Near the action area, tax forfeited land is open for recreational activities such as:

- Biking, hiking, and snowshoeing near Tioga Beach;
- Approximately 25 miles of mountain biking trails west of Tioga Beach Road (Figure 3);
- Boating, fishing, and dispersed camping at and near Long Lake; and
- Hunter walking trail system near Miller Road.

UPM-Blandin is a paper company and paper mill; UPM-Blandin uses most of the land near the action area for timber harvesting. The land owned by the Minnesota DNR that the Proposed Action would be routed through is primarily used for forestry management. The majority of the School Trust Lands in the area would be avoided (see Table 2), although potentially two parcels along Highway 17 and Highway 6 would be intersected and coordinated with the Minnesota DNR. The Minnesota DNR also owns land adjacent to the proposed route that is used for iron mining leasing. Private landowners use the land for private use, recreation (e.g., hunting and ATV use), and commercial business.

Approximately 0.1 miles of the Proposed Action that meets Highway 6 would intersect Chippewa National Forest land owned and managed by the USFS. The USFS is a participating agency in the trail planning process, and was invited to review and comment on the Draft EA.

3.3.2 Environmental Consequences

3.3.2.1 No Action Alternative

No changes or effects to land use or ownership would occur from the Proposed Action under this alternative. However, the benefits from increased recreational resources would not be realized. Selection of this alternative does not meet the overall NCT purpose to provide for the enjoyment of outdoor areas and world-class walking and hiking experiences. This would be a long-term and adverse impact to NCT recreational resources when compared to the Proposed Action Alternative.

3.3.2.2 Proposed Action Alternative

The NPS would not own any land under this alternative, and no changes in land ownership would occur. The Proposed Action would be established on public land to the maximum extent possible. Sections through areas of private ownership would only be established with the voluntary permission of the landowner, either by securing verbal or written permission to cross their lands or by purchasing an easement for the trail (NPS, 2004). The Minnesota DNR currently holds a conservation easement with UPM-Blandin that allows permission for the NCT on UPM-Blandin's land (UPM-Blandin, 2010).

All existing land use policies and plans would remain in effect. The NPS would work with land management agencies, the NCTA, and volunteers to construct, operate, and use the Proposed Action in accordance with landowner policies and plans. Section 7(a)(2) of the National Trails System Act states: “Development and management of each segment of the National Trails System shall be designed to harmonize with and complement any established multiple-use plans for the specific area in order to insure continued maximum benefits from the land.” Public landowners and land management agencies would continue to manage their properties under their own mandates and as required by their own land management use plans and policies. The USFS would continue to manage their land, and the trail section that intersects their land, on the basis of established Forest Policies and applicable standards and guidelines. Where necessary, signage encouraging hikers to stay on the trail would be installed to minimize hikers’ straying, such as near mining stockpile areas. If trail users or volunteers inform the NPS of persistent unallowable uses on the NCT (e.g., bikers, ATVs, etc.), the NPS would coordinate any response with the landowner to ensure accordance with their management, plans, and policies. With this coordination, any adverse impacts on landowner policies and plans would be localized, long-term, and minor (NPS, 2004).

The Proposed Action would be consistent with the existing recreational resources in the action area. The development of a new section of the NCT would attract additional recreational users, though users from outside the region, such as long-distance through-hikers, would represent a minor increase. Trail use patterns indicate that the users would primarily be local or regional residents who likely already utilize the recreational resources in the region (NPS, 2004). The increase in hiking and camping recreation opportunities for the local community and long distance NCT through-hikers would have a long-term, beneficial effect on recreational resources.

3.4 Surface Water Resources

3.4.1 Affected Environment

The Proposed Action is in the Upper Mississippi River Headwaters watershed⁸, which is a largely forested watershed that contains the Mississippi River and its headwaters at Lake Itasca (Itasca SWCD, n.d.). Major waterbodies surrounding the action area include Pokegama Lake, Long Lake, Rice Lake, Siseebakwet and Little Siseebakwet Lake, Figure Eight Lake, Leighton Lake, and Willow Lake. These lakes are commonly used for public and private recreation, such as camping, boating, and fishing. The channel that the Proposed Action would cross with approximately 40-feet of bridge (Figure 3) is a former man-made log driving channel between Figure Eight and Little Siseebakwet Lakes. Potential natural freshwater sources near the potential campsites are small, generally unnamed streams and ponds that are connected to the major waterbodies via channels or streams.

The landscape is dotted with palustrine (i.e., dominated by trees, shrubs, or other emergent vegetation) wetlands of various sizes. The wetland that the Proposed Action would cross with 400-feet of puncheon (Figure 3) is a continuously saturated palustrine coniferous bog dominated by black spruce (*Picea mariana*). There is also a palustrine open bog dominated by woody shrubs, saplings, and herbaceous vegetation to the south of the proposed 40-foot bridge over the channel (USFWS, 2021b; MN DNR, 2021). Wetlands are valuable water resources because they are highly productive, biologically diverse, pollutant and sediment filterers, erosion stabilizers, stormwater absorbers, and providers of recreational opportunities (NPS, 2016). EO

⁸ A watershed is an area of land where all the streams and rainfall drain to a common outlet, such as the Mississippi River.

11990, *Protection of Wetlands*, requires Federal agencies to avoid impacts on wetlands to the extent possible.

Most of the surface water resources within the Upper Mississippi River Headwaters watershed meet Minnesota's surface water quality standards for conventional parameter pollutants, except for mercury. Major threats to surface water quality in this watershed include loss of habitat from development, sedimentation from forest management practices, contamination and sedimentation from development runoff, and loss of biodiversity from aquatic invasive species (Itasca SWCD, n.d.). Watershed monitoring in 2015 by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency found the major waterbodies surrounding the action area (e.g., Pokegama Lake, Rice Lake, Little Siseebakwet Lake) to meet the pollution parameters for aquatic recreation and "fully support" recreation activities, including swimming (MPCA, 2017). Potential natural freshwater sources near the potential campsites are upstream of the areas with mining use (Figure 3).

3.4.2 Environmental Consequences

3.4.2.1 No Action Alternative

No effects to surface water resources would occur from the Proposed Action under this alternative.

3.4.2.2 Proposed Action Alternative

The NPS and NCTA have avoided wetlands to the extent possible on the proposed route. At this time, the approximately 18-miles of the Proposed Action route is anticipated to cross one wetland with approximately 400-feet of puncheon. During construction of the puncheon, there would be short-term and minor impacts to the wetland, such as temporary disturbance of wetland habitat. During construction of the approximately 40-feet of bridge over the channel, there would be short-term and minor impacts to the channel, such as a temporary increase in water turbidity. Impacts to other wetlands and water bodies that are near the proposed route would be minor, such as the wetland that is south of the 40-feet bridge. Runoff or sedimentation into these nearby water bodies would be temporary during construction, minimized by not working during precipitation events, and negligible when compared to the existing heavy recreational use of the water bodies. Post-construction, long-term adverse impacts would be negligible. The puncheon and bridge would be elevated, keeping hikers out of the wetland and channel and allowing free-flowing water underneath.

Prior to construction, the NPS, NCTA, or landowner would obtain all required Federal, State, and local permits and approvals necessary, including the appropriate wetland and water crossing permits. All requirements and limitations in the obtained permits would be adhered to. The known wetland and channel crossing, as well as any water/wetland crossings that could become apparent in the future, would be subject to review and consideration under the permitting regulations identified in Table 4.

Table 4: Applicable Wetland Permitting Regulations

Applicable Regulation	Description of Regulation	Applicability to the Proposed Action's Known Wetland and Channel Crossing
NPS Director's Order #77-1	States an NPS goal of "no net loss" of wetlands; requires a Wetland Statement of Findings for NPS actions that have the potential for adverse wetland impacts unless certain exemptions are met	Exempt from a Wetland Statement of Findings as a "scenic overlook and foot/bike trails or boardwalks where the primary purpose include public education, interpretation, or enjoyment of wetland resources and where total wetland impacts from fill placement are 0.1 acre or less."
Section 404 of the Clean Water Act	Regulates the discharge of dredged or fill material into waters of the United States, including wetlands, through a permit review process administered by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers (USACE); USACE authorizes certain regulated activities under Regional General Permits	Authorized under Category 3 of the Transportation Regional General Permit for Minnesota and Wisconsin (USACE, 2018); the NPS has contacted the USACE Regulatory Field Office for their comments and input (Section 4.2)
Minnesota DNR Public Waters Program	Requires permits from the Minnesota DNR for the construction, fill, and other activities in public waters and wetlands	The wetland and channel are not identified by the Minnesota DNR as public waters or wetlands (MN DNR, 2021)
Minnesota Wetland Conservation Act	Regulates wetlands in the State that are not public waters; activities that would drain, fill, or excavate in a wetland require approval from the applicable Local Government Unit	The NPS, NCTA, or landowner would inform and coordinate with the Itasca Soil and Water Conservation District prior to construction in the wetland and channel

Neither the NPS or the NCTA manage an official long-distance hiking program because of the vast variety of landowners, managing authorities, rules, and regulations across the NCT. The NPS and NCTA would direct long-distance hikers and campers who might use the natural freshwater sources near the potential campsites to contact local NCTA Chapters and land managers regarding water availability, permission, and use (NCTA, 2021). The NCTA website for hike-planning directs to the American Hiking Society guidelines for water use, including purification methods and standards (e.g., boiling, filtering, chlorine drops, etc.) (AHS, 2021). If applicable, the NCTA would post known or reported water use advisories in their trail alerts, and the Arrowhead Chapter would include it on signage at entry points. With this guidance and hikers' proper long-distance hike planning, impacts from potential natural freshwater source use would be minor or negligible.

3.5 *Wildlife*

3.5.1 **Affected Environment**

Non-special status wildlife: Common wildlife in the action area are those that prefer forested and wetland habitats, such as white tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), gray squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*), painted turtles (*Chrysemys picta*), American toads (*Anaxyrus americanus*), ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*), and various species of insects (MN DNR, 2021c). Wildlife in and near the action area experience disturbance from existing human activities in the area, such as

outdoor recreation, hunting, timber harvesting, iron mining, and roadways (i.e., Highway 6, County Roads 17 and 63, and a number of vehicle spur roads).

Invasive wildlife: Invasive species are non-native plants and animals that cause or may cause harm to the economy, environment, or human health, or those that threaten or may threaten natural resources or the use of natural resources (Minnesota Statute 84D.01). Common invasive wildlife in Minnesota include emerald ash borers (*Agrilus planipennis*) (beetle that feeds on ash trees) and zebra mussels (*Dreissena polymorpha*) (aquatic mussel impacting lakes, including the Great Lakes). In Itasca County, aquatic invasive species are a particular concern. Pokegama Lake near the action area is impacted by aquatic invasive wildlife such as zebra mussels and rainbow smelt (*Osmerus mordax*) (Itasca SWCD, 2021; MinnPost, 2012).

Special status wildlife: Special status species include those that are designated as:

- **Endangered:** Designation used by the USFWS and Minnesota DNR for species that are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range
- **Threatened:** Designation used by the USFWS and Minnesota DNR for species which are likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range
- **Special Concern:** Designation used by the Minnesota DNR for species that are not endangered or threatened, but are uncommon in Minnesota or have unique or specific habitat requirements in Minnesota that require special monitoring
- **Protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act:** Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are no longer designated by the USFWS as endangered or threatened species, but are afforded Federal protection under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940
- **Birds of Conservation Concern (BCC):** Designation used by the USFWS for nongame birds that are likely to become candidates for threatened or endangered designation, the majority of which are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918

A 2021 review of Minnesota DNR's rare species list indicated that there are 78 special status species present or potentially present in Itasca County (MN DNR, 2021b). The NPS identified two additional special status species with a presence or potential presence in the action area using the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) tool. The IPaC review did not identify any critical habitat⁹ in the action area (USFWS, 2021). The USFWS' IPaC report and Minnesota DNR's rare species list for Itasca County are provided in Appendix B to this EA. The NPS requested a refined list of special status species for the action area from the Minnesota DNR's Natural Heritage Information System.

The Itasca County list includes State-listed wildlife species that are primarily associated with wetland and water habitats, including three insects, two mussels, five fish, one reptile, and one amphibian. The insects, mussels, and fish are entirely aquatic or generally restricted to near-water habitat, while the four-toed salamander (*Hemidactylium scutatum*) (special concern) and Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*) (threatened) may travel between wetlands and upland habitats (MN DNR, 2021b). None of these species are federally-listed.

The Itasca County list also includes three species of bats which are designated as special concern in Minnesota: big brown bat (*Eptesicus fuscus*), little brown bat (*Myotis lucifugus*), and the NLEB (*Myotis septentrionalis*). The NLEB is also federally listed as threatened. Primary threats to these bats include loss of summer habitat and a fungal disease called white-nosed syndrome. The

⁹ Critical habitat is a habitat area identified by the USFWS to be essential to the conservation of a federally-listed species.

NLEB prefers hibernating in caves and mines (i.e., hibernacula) in the winter and raising their young in loose bark or cavities and cracks in trees that are typically 3 inches dbh or greater in size (i.e., maternity roosts) in the summer. The USFWS identifies the NLEB pup season as June 1 through July 31. USFWS and Minnesota DNR do not identify any known NLEB maternity roost trees or hibernaculum in the townships associated with the action area (USFWS and MN DNR, 2020).

The NPS identified two other mammals with a potential presence in Itasca County during the desktop reviews: Northern bog lemming (*Synaptomys borealis*) and the Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). The Northern bog lemming is a State-listed special concern species, and the Canada lynx is a State-listed special concern and Federal-listed threatened species. While the Canada lynx was identified in the USFWS IPaC review, the Minnesota DNR does not identify Canada lynx as occurring in Itasca County. Neither of these mammal species are expected to be in the action area as they prefer boreal habitats closer to the Canadian border (MN DNR, 2021b).

The Itasca County list also identified eight birds, including seven State-listed special concern species and the bald eagle. These birds typically prefer to be near water or wetlands and may nest in trees (e.g., bald eagle and red-shouldered hawk (*Buteo lineatus*)) or on the ground (e.g., trumpeter swan (*Cygnus buccinator*) and yellow rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*)). Threats to these birds include habitat disturbance and loss, competition with non-native birds, and illegal hunting (MN DNR, 2021b). In addition, the IPaC review identified nine migratory BCCs with a potential to occur in the action area. Six of these BCCs could be present in the action area during their breeding season in June, such as the Canada warbler (*Cardellina canadensis*), bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*), and American bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) (USFWS, 2021).

3.5.2 Environmental Consequences

3.5.2.1 No Action Alternative

No effects to wildlife or special status wildlife would occur from the Proposed Action under this alternative.

3.5.2.2 Proposed Action Alternative

Non-special status wildlife: During construction of the Proposed Action, there would be potential disturbance and mortality to some wildlife. Mobile wildlife species such as mammals and birds would be expected to avoid construction activities, but less-mobile species such as insects could potentially suffer mortality. The level of disturbance from construction activities would vary depending on species, but would be overall minor, temporary, and localized.

Post-construction, disturbed wildlife would be generally expected to return to their pre-construction condition. The proposed puncheon and bridge would be elevated, allowing for small and/or aquatic animals' free-movement underneath. The use of the proposed two to three primitive backcountry campsites could disturb wildlife from camper noise, firepit use at night, and trash. However, long-term impacts to wildlife would be minor when compared to the disturbance from existing land use and activities in the area (see Section 3.3.1). In addition, trail and campsite monitoring and maintenance would help minimize trash and further disturbance of wildlife (NPS, 2004).

Overall, adverse impacts to wildlife would be localized, short- and long-term, and minor.

Invasive wildlife: Invasive species could be carried and spread during trail construction on workers boots, clothes, and equipment. Post-construction, they could be carried and spread on hikers' boots and clothes. The potential for this spread would be minimized by Arrowhead

Chapter volunteers cleaning all equipment, boots, and clothing before starting and after leaving each workday. In addition, existing vehicle cross-roads would be used during construction for access to minimize off-road travel. Post-construction, trail and campsite monitoring and maintenance would help to encourage hikers to stay on the cleared trail, minimizing the potential for hikers to encounter an off-trail invasive species. The potential for invasive species spread by hikers would also be minimized by the PlayCleanGo® interpretation and boot brush stations at trail entry points.

Special status wildlife: The NPS is consulting with the USFWS under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and has contacted the Minnesota DNR's Natural Heritage to ensure the Proposed Action does not significantly adversely impact a special status species. Specific recommendations from the USFWS and Minnesota DNR that are identified through the consultations to minimize or avoid impacts to special status species would be implemented as part of the Proposed Action. These measures could include avoiding a location known to have a special-status species, implementing buffer areas around identified bald eagle nests during their nesting season, and seasonal restrictions on certain disturbing construction activities during special-status species' sensitive periods.

The NPS previously informally consulted with the USFWS in 2002 for the broad Northeastern Minnesota route identified in the 2004 EA. As a result of that consultation, the NPS determined that there should be no effect on Federal-listed species, and the USFWS concurred with this opinion. The NLEB was not a listed species at the time of this consultation (NPS, 2004). For the Proposed Action, the NPS has determined that the NLEB is unlikely to be adversely affected because there are no known maternity roost trees or hibernaculum identified in the action area, the felling of standing trees 3 inches dbh and greater would be avoided to the extent possible, and any potential tree removal would be outside the pup season of June 1 through July 31.

With the implementation of any USFWS and Minnesota DNR recommendations, as well as the impact minimization measures identified for general wildlife, no adverse impacts are expected to special status wildlife.

3.6 Vegetation

3.6.1 Affected Environment

Non-special status vegetation: The action area is in the Chippewa Plains Subsection of the Minnesota DNR's Ecological Classification System. This Subsection is characterized by forest, with aspen (*Populus spp.*) as the most common tree species, in both pure stands and mixed stands with birch (*Betula spp.*), maple (*Acer spp.*), oak (*Quercus spp.*), white spruce (*Picea glauca*), jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*), and red pine (*Pinus resinosa*) (MN DNR, 2021a). As with wildlife, vegetation in and near the action area experience disturbance from existing human activities and invasive species.

Invasive vegetation: Invasive wetland and aquatic plants that overtake native plant communities, such as curly leaf pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*) and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), can be found at the lakes and in wetland areas near the action area (Itasca SWCD, 2021; MinnPost, 2012).

Special status vegetation: The majority of the Minnesota DNR's rare species list for Itasca County list consists of State-listed vascular plant species: 8 endangered, 14 threatened, and 25 special concern. These include flowering plants, sedges and grasses, ferns, and shrubs. Many of these plant species are associated with wetland and water habitats, growing in the water, on shorelines, or on wet ground. The list also includes five species of lichen (one endangered and

four special concern) that prefer growing on conifer trees and one species of moss (threatened) that prefers growing on swampy ground.

3.6.2 Environmental Consequences

3.6.2.1 No Action Alternative

No effects to vegetation or special status vegetation would occur from the Proposed Action under this alternative.

3.6.2.2 Proposed Action Alternative

Non-special status vegetation: During construction of the Proposed Action, there would be potential disturbance and mortality to some vegetation. Construction would include the removal of brush and small saplings. Vegetation would also be cleared for tent and firepit space in two to three campsite areas, and gravel would be placed to expand one parking lot and create one new parking lot in an existing roadside, open grassy area. The disturbance to vegetation from construction activities would be overall minor, temporary, and localized.

Post-construction, off-trail disturbed vegetation would be generally expected to return to their pre-construction condition. However, creation of the new parking area would permanently convert the grass to gravel. Further, use of the proposed two to three primitive backcountry campsites could disturb vegetation from the creation of social trails. Overall, long-term impacts to vegetation would be minor when compared to the disturbance from existing land use and activities in the area (see Section 3.3.1). In addition, trail and campsite monitoring and maintenance would help minimize further disturbance of off-trail vegetation (NPS, 2004).

Overall, adverse impacts to vegetation would be localized, short- and long-term, and minor.

Invasive vegetation: Refer to “invasive wildlife” in Section 3.5.2.2.

Special status vegetation: The NPS is consulting with the USFWS under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and has contacted the Minnesota DNR’s Natural Heritage to ensure the Proposed Action does not significantly adversely impact a special status species. Specific recommendations from the USFWS and Minnesota DNR that are identified through the consultations to minimize or avoid impacts to special status species would be implemented as part of the Proposed Action. With the implementation of any USFWS and Minnesota DNR recommendations, as well as the impact minimization measures identified for general vegetation, no adverse impacts are expected to special status vegetation.

3.7 Visitor Use and Experience

3.7.1 Affected Environment

Hiking is a key component of regional tourism in the Northeastern Minnesota region. Other attractions in the region that draw significant numbers include skiing both downhill and cross country, bicycling, snowmobiling, hunting, and angling (NPS, 2004). Visitors to the action area are using the existing outdoor and dispersed recreation open to the public, as well as private recreation and ATV use (see Section 3.3.1).

The NCT section that currently routes through this area is roadwalk. While long-distance NCT through-hikers likely use the roadwalk, it is unlikely that the local community uses this roadwalk section for a day hike, likely opting to instead use the other hiking trails in the area. Roadwalks are not particularly attractive or safe trail sections. Long distance hikers and day hikers expect and prefer to have extensive vistas and scenic variety, which a roadwalk typically does not

provide (NPS, 2004). Further, roadwalks are generally unsafe because hikers are walking next to a roadway that is typically utilized by vehicles.

3.7.2 Environmental Consequences

3.7.2.1 No Action Alternative

No changes or effects to visitor use and experience would occur from the Proposed Action under this alternative. However, the benefits to NCT users from improved scenery, enjoyment, and safety would not be realized. Selection of this alternative would not meet the goals and purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System. This would be a long-term and adverse impact to NCT hiker use and experience when compared to the Proposed Action Alternative.

3.7.2.2 Proposed Action Alternative

Implementing this alternative would provide NCT hikers with access to 18 new miles of continuous trail with improved hiking experiences, scenery, and safety. Development of the Proposed Action would expand the opportunity and enjoyment of hiking and camping for both local day hikers and long distance NCT through-hikers. Members of the local community who previously would not have used the roadwalk would be expected to be attracted to using the proposed new route and campsites. Selection of this alternative would meet the goals and purpose of the NCT Route Adjustment, the NCT, and the National Trails System. The effects of the Proposed Action Alternative on visitor use and experience would be long-term and highly beneficial.

4.0 Consultation and Coordination

The NPS conducted consultation and coordination with Federal, State, and local agencies, as well as Native American Tribes, to identify issues and concerns related to natural and cultural resources. This chapter provides a summary of the agencies and Tribes that were contacted in the preparation of the EA and/or were invited to review and comment the Draft EA. Appendix C to this EA provides copies and examples of correspondences the NPS sent.

4.1 *Lead Agency*

This EA has been prepared by the National Park Service staff at North Country National Scenic Trail located in Lowell, Michigan and reviewed by staff at the Midwest Regional Office located in Omaha, Nebraska.

4.2 *Federal Agencies*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Twin Cities Ecological Field Office
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 5
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bemidji Regulatory Field Office
U.S. Forest Service – Chippewa National Forest

4.3 *State Agencies*

Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources – Natural Heritage
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources – Division of Forestry
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources – Division of Lands and Minerals

4.4 *Native American Tribes*

1854 Treaty Authority
Minnesota Chippewa Tribe
Apache Tribe of Oklahoma
Bois Forte Band of the Minnesota Chippewa
Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes
Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
Fort Belknap Indian Community
Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
Leech Lake Band of the Minnesota Chippewa
Menominee Indian Tribe
Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe
Upper Sioux Community
White Earth Band of the Minnesota Chippewa
Minnesota Indian Affairs Council

4.5 *Local Agencies*

Itasca County – Land Department
Itasca County – Park System
Itasca Soil and Water Conservation District
Itasca County Historical Society
City of Cohasset - Recreation

UPM-Blandin
Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board
Rajala/Boundary Company
Grand Rapids Itasca Mountain Bike Association

4.6 *Other Environmental and Regulatory Requirements*

The NPS is consulting and coordinating with some agencies and Tribes under specific regulations:

- **Endangered Species Act:** Section 7 consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- **National Historic Preservation Act:** Section 106 consultation with the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office and associated Native American Tribes

The NPS places a high priority on public involvement in the NEPA process and giving the public an opportunity to comment on the Proposed Action. A Notice of Availability was published in the Itasca County Spotlights (<https://www.co.itasca.mn.us/>), allowing 30 days for public review and comment of the EA on the NPS' PEPC (<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/NCTtiogabeach>). The NPS and NCTA also coordinated with the Itasca County Lands Department to host a hybrid (i.e., in-person and virtual) public meeting, as detailed in the Notice of Availability.

5.0 List of Preparers and Contributors

The persons responsible for the review of the proposed action, the supporting information and analyses, and the preparation of this EA are listed below:

US DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Midwest Region

Christine Gabriel, Regional Environmental Coordinator & NEPA Lead

James Lange, Planning Manager

Janet Eckhoff, Review Manager and Environmental Protection Specialist

Amber Rhodes, Environmental Protection Specialist

Timothy Shilling, Archeologist

North Country National Scenic Trail

Christopher Loudenslager, Superintendent

Stephanie Liguori, NEPA Specialist

Kenneth Hendrickson, Trail Manager

Luke Jordan, Trail Planner

NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Matthew Davis, Regional Trail Planner for Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota

Matthew Rowbotham, GIS Program Manager

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Appendix A: Acronym List

APE	Area of Potential Effect
ARPA	Archeological Resources Protection Act
ATV	All-terrain vehicle
BCC	Bird of Conservation Concern
CEQ	Council on Environmental Quality
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DBH	Diameter at Breast Height
DOI	Department of the Interior
DNR	Department of Natural Resources
EA	Environmental Assessment
EO	Executive Order
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FONSI	Finding of No Significant Impact
IPaC	Information for Planning and Conservation
NAGPRA	Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act
NCT	North Country National Scenic Trail
NCTA	North Country Trail Association
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NLEB	Northern Long-Eared Bat
NPS	National Park Service
NRHP	National Register of Historic Places
PEPC	Planning, Environment, and Public Comment
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
USACE	United States Army Corp of Engineers
USC	United States Code
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
USFS	United States Forest Service

Appendix B: Special Status Species

Enclosures:

Information for Planning and Consultation Report for the Proposed Action, USFWS, 2021

Rare Species List for Itasca County, Minnesota DNR, 2021



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Minnesota-Wisconsin Ecological Services Field Office
4101 American Blvd E
Bloomington, MN 55425-1665
Phone: (952) 252-0092 Fax: (952) 646-2873
<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/Endangered/section7/s7process/step1.html>



In Reply Refer To:

January 25, 2021

Consultation Code: 03E19000-2021-SLI-0585

Event Code: 03E19000-2021-E-01915

Project Name: Tioga Beach Trail

Subject: List of threatened and endangered species that may occur in your proposed project location or may be affected by your proposed project

To Whom It May Concern:

The attached species list identifies any federally threatened, endangered, proposed and candidate species that may occur within the action area – the area that is likely to be affected by your proposed project. The list also includes any designated and proposed critical habitat that overlaps with the action area. This list is provided to you as the initial step of the consultation process required under section 7(c) of the Endangered Species Act, also referred to as Section 7 Consultation.

Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 requires that actions authorized, funded, or carried out by Federal agencies not jeopardize federally threatened or endangered species or adversely modify designated critical habitat. To fulfill this mandate, Federal agencies (or their designated non-federal representatives) must consult with the Service if they determine their project may affect listed species or critical habitat. Agencies must confer under section 7(a)(4) if any proposed action is likely to jeopardize species proposed for listing as endangered or threatened or likely to adversely modify any proposed critical habitat.

Under 50 CFR 402.12(e) (the regulations that implement Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act) the accuracy of this species list should be verified after 90 days. This verification can be completed formally or informally. You may verify the list by visiting the ECOS-IPaC website <http://ecos.fws.gov/ipac/> at regular intervals during project planning and implementation and completing the same process you used to receive the attached list. As an alternative, you may contact this Ecological Services Field Office for updates.

Please use the species list provided and visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Region 3 Section 7 Technical Assistance website at - <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/endangered/section7/s7process/index.html>. This website contains step-by-step instructions that will help you

determine if your project will have an adverse effect on listed species or critical habitat and will help lead you through the Section 7 process.

For all **wind energy projects** and **projects that include installing towers that use guy wires or are over 200 feet in height**, please contact this field office directly for assistance, even if no federally listed plants, animals or critical habitat are present within the action area.

Although no longer protected under the Endangered Species Act, be aware that bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 668 *et seq.*) and Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703 *et seq.*), as are golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*). Projects affecting these species may require measures to avoid harming eagles or may require a permit. If your project is near a bald eagle nest or winter roost area, see our Eagle Permits website at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/midwestbird/EaglePermits/index.html>. The information available at this website will help you determine if you can avoid impacting eagles or if a permit may be necessary.

We appreciate your concern for threatened and endangered species. Please include the Consultation Tracking Number in the header of this letter with any request for consultation or correspondence about your project that you submit to our office.

Attachment(s):

- Official Species List
- Migratory Birds

Official Species List

This list is provided pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, and fulfills the requirement for Federal agencies to "request of the Secretary of the Interior information whether any species which is listed or proposed to be listed may be present in the area of a proposed action".

This species list is provided by:

Minnesota-Wisconsin Ecological Services Field Office

4101 American Blvd E

Bloomington, MN 55425-1665

(952) 252-0092

Project Summary

Consultation Code: 03E19000-2021-SLI-0585

Event Code: 03E19000-2021-E-01915

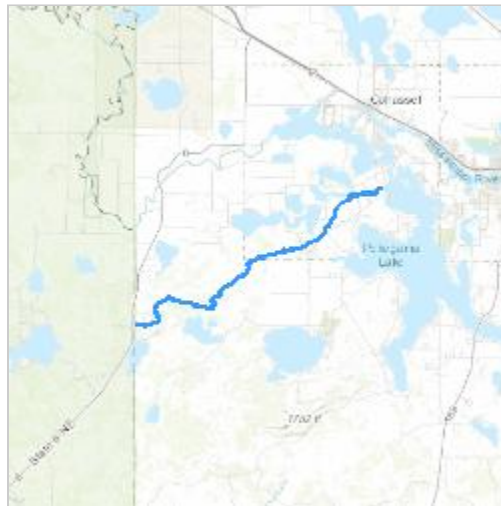
Project Name: Tioga Beach Trail

Project Type: RECREATION CONSTRUCTION / MAINTENANCE

Project Description: The Tioga Beach Trail includes approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail in Itasca County, MN.

Project Location:

Approximate location of the project can be viewed in Google Maps: <https://www.google.com/maps/@47.19776715,-93.68835612443709,14z>



Counties: Cass and Itasca counties, Minnesota

Endangered Species Act Species

There is a total of 2 threatened, endangered, or candidate species on this species list.

Species on this list should be considered in an effects analysis for your project and could include species that exist in another geographic area. For example, certain fish may appear on the species list because a project could affect downstream species.

IPaC does not display listed species or critical habitats under the sole jurisdiction of NOAA Fisheries¹, as USFWS does not have the authority to speak on behalf of NOAA and the Department of Commerce.

See the "Critical habitats" section below for those critical habitats that lie wholly or partially within your project area under this office's jurisdiction. Please contact the designated FWS office if you have questions.

-
1. [NOAA Fisheries](#), also known as the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), is an office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration within the Department of Commerce.

Mammals

NAME	STATUS
Canada Lynx <i>Lynx canadensis</i> Population: Wherever Found in Contiguous U.S. There is final critical habitat for this species. The location of the critical habitat is not available. Species profile: https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/3652	Threatened
Northern Long-eared Bat <i>Myotis septentrionalis</i> No critical habitat has been designated for this species. Species profile: https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/9045	Threatened

Critical habitats

THERE ARE NO CRITICAL HABITATS WITHIN YOUR PROJECT AREA UNDER THIS OFFICE'S JURISDICTION.

Migratory Birds

Certain birds are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act¹ and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act².

Any person or organization who plans or conducts activities that may result in impacts to migratory birds, eagles, and their habitats should follow appropriate regulations and consider implementing appropriate conservation measures, as described [below](#).

-
1. The [Migratory Birds Treaty Act](#) of 1918.
 2. The [Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act](#) of 1940.
 3. 50 C.F.R. Sec. 10.12 and 16 U.S.C. Sec. 668(a)

The birds listed below are birds of particular concern either because they occur on the [USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern](#) (BCC) list or warrant special attention in your project location. To learn more about the levels of concern for birds on your list and how this list is generated, see the FAQ [below](#). This is not a list of every bird you may find in this location, nor a guarantee that every bird on this list will be found in your project area. To see exact locations of where birders and the general public have sighted birds in and around your project area, visit the [E-bird data mapping tool](#) (Tip: enter your location, desired date range and a species on your list). For projects that occur off the Atlantic Coast, additional maps and models detailing the relative occurrence and abundance of bird species on your list are available. Links to additional information about Atlantic Coast birds, and other important information about your migratory bird list, including how to properly interpret and use your migratory bird report, can be found [below](#).

For guidance on when to schedule activities or implement avoidance and minimization measures to reduce impacts to migratory birds on your list, click on the PROBABILITY OF PRESENCE SUMMARY at the top of your list to see when these birds are most likely to be present and breeding in your project area.

NAME	BREEDING SEASON
American Bittern <i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) only in particular Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) in the continental USA https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/6582	Breeds Apr 1 to Aug 31
Bald Eagle <i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i> This is not a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) in this area, but warrants attention because of the Eagle Act or for potential susceptibilities in offshore areas from certain types of development or activities. https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/1626	Breeds Dec 1 to Aug 31

NAME	BREEDING SEASON
Black Tern <i>Chlidonias niger</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) only in particular Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) in the continental USA https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/3093	Breeds May 15 to Aug 20
Bobolink <i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) throughout its range in the continental USA and Alaska.	Breeds May 20 to Jul 31
Canada Warbler <i>Cardellina canadensis</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) throughout its range in the continental USA and Alaska.	Breeds May 20 to Aug 10
Connecticut Warbler <i>Oporornis agilis</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) throughout its range in the continental USA and Alaska.	Breeds Jun 15 to Aug 10
Evening Grosbeak <i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) throughout its range in the continental USA and Alaska.	Breeds May 15 to Aug 10
Golden-winged Warbler <i>Vermivora chrysoptera</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) throughout its range in the continental USA and Alaska. https://ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/8745	Breeds May 1 to Jul 20
Harris's Sparrow <i>Zonotrichia querula</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) throughout its range in the continental USA and Alaska.	Breeds elsewhere
Rusty Blackbird <i>Euphagus carolinus</i> This is a Bird of Conservation Concern (BCC) throughout its range in the continental USA and Alaska.	Breeds May 10 to Jul 20

Probability Of Presence Summary

The graphs below provide our best understanding of when birds of concern are most likely to be present in your project area. This information can be used to tailor and schedule your project activities to avoid or minimize impacts to birds. Please make sure you read and understand the FAQ "Proper Interpretation and Use of Your Migratory Bird Report" before using or attempting to interpret this report.

Probability of Presence (■)

Each green bar represents the bird's relative probability of presence in the 10km grid cell(s) your project overlaps during a particular week of the year. (A year is represented as 12 4-week months.) A taller bar indicates a higher probability of species presence. The survey effort (see below) can be used to establish a level of confidence in the presence score. One can have higher confidence in the presence score if the corresponding survey effort is also high.

How is the probability of presence score calculated? The calculation is done in three steps:

1. The probability of presence for each week is calculated as the number of survey events in the week where the species was detected divided by the total number of survey events for that week. For example, if in week 12 there were 20 survey events and the Spotted Towhee was found in 5 of them, the probability of presence of the Spotted Towhee in week 12 is 0.25.
2. To properly present the pattern of presence across the year, the relative probability of presence is calculated. This is the probability of presence divided by the maximum probability of presence across all weeks. For example, imagine the probability of presence in week 20 for the Spotted Towhee is 0.05, and that the probability of presence at week 12 (0.25) is the maximum of any week of the year. The relative probability of presence on week 12 is $0.25/0.25 = 1$; at week 20 it is $0.05/0.25 = 0.2$.
3. The relative probability of presence calculated in the previous step undergoes a statistical conversion so that all possible values fall between 0 and 10, inclusive. This is the probability of presence score.

Breeding Season (■)

Yellow bars denote a very liberal estimate of the time-frame inside which the bird breeds across its entire range. If there are no yellow bars shown for a bird, it does not breed in your project area.

Survey Effort (|)

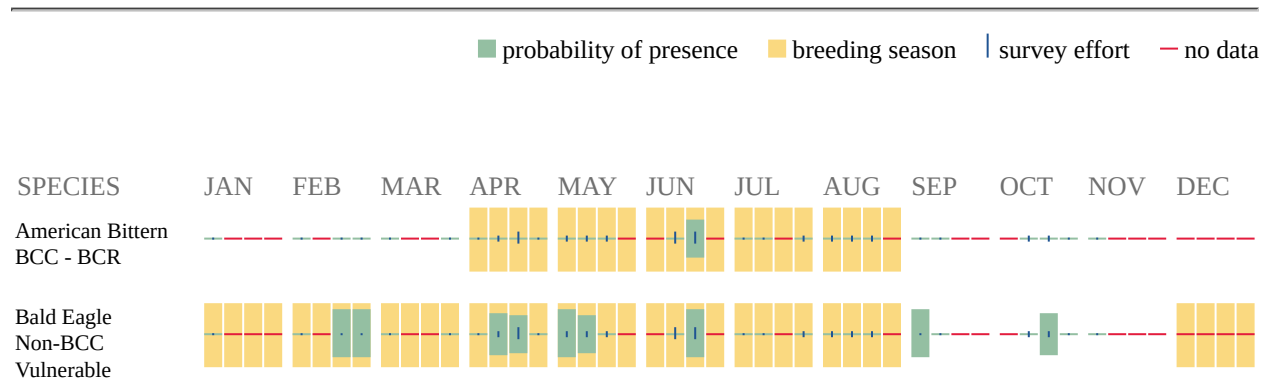
Vertical black lines superimposed on probability of presence bars indicate the number of surveys performed for that species in the 10km grid cell(s) your project area overlaps. The number of surveys is expressed as a range, for example, 33 to 64 surveys.

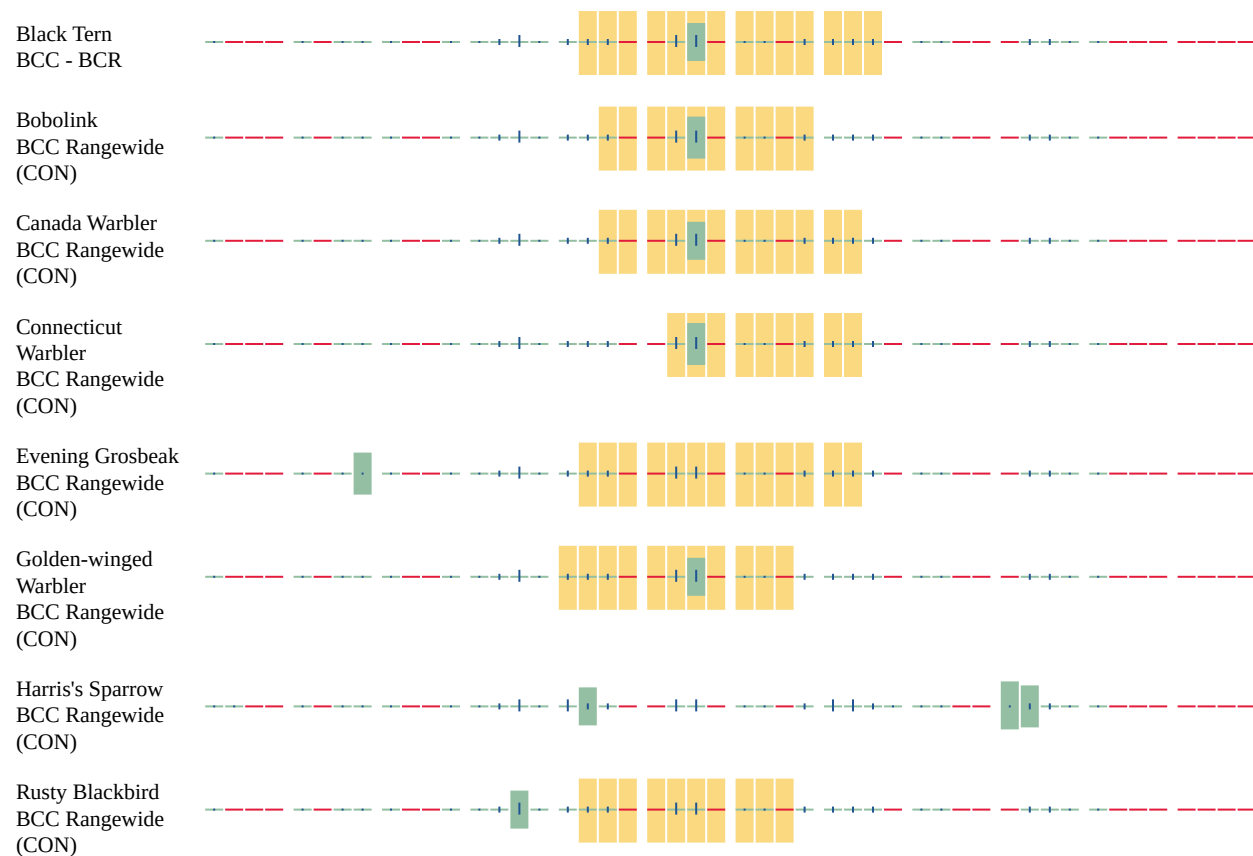
No Data (—)

A week is marked as having no data if there were no survey events for that week.

Survey Timeframe

Surveys from only the last 10 years are used in order to ensure delivery of currently relevant information. The exception to this is areas off the Atlantic coast, where bird returns are based on all years of available data, since data in these areas is currently much more sparse.





Additional information can be found using the following links:

- Birds of Conservation Concern <http://www.fws.gov/birds/management/managed-species/birds-of-conservation-concern.php>
- Measures for avoiding and minimizing impacts to birds <http://www.fws.gov/birds/management/project-assessment-tools-and-guidance/conservation-measures.php>
- Nationwide conservation measures for birds <http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/pdf/management/nationwidestandardconservationmeasures.pdf>

Migratory Birds FAQ

Tell me more about conservation measures I can implement to avoid or minimize impacts to migratory birds.

[Nationwide Conservation Measures](#) describes measures that can help avoid and minimize impacts to all birds at any location year round. Implementation of these measures is particularly important when birds are most likely to occur in the project area. When birds may be breeding in the area, identifying the locations of any active nests and avoiding their destruction is a very helpful impact minimization measure. To see when birds are most likely to occur and be breeding in your project area, view the Probability of Presence Summary. [Additional measures](#) or [permits](#)

may be advisable depending on the type of activity you are conducting and the type of infrastructure or bird species present on your project site.

What does IPaC use to generate the migratory birds potentially occurring in my specified location?

The Migratory Bird Resource List is comprised of USFWS [Birds of Conservation Concern \(BCC\)](#) and other species that may warrant special attention in your project location.

The migratory bird list generated for your project is derived from data provided by the [Avian Knowledge Network \(AKN\)](#). The AKN data is based on a growing collection of [survey, banding, and citizen science datasets](#) and is queried and filtered to return a list of those birds reported as occurring in the 10km grid cell(s) which your project intersects, and that have been identified as warranting special attention because they are a BCC species in that area, an eagle ([Eagle Act](#) requirements may apply), or a species that has a particular vulnerability to offshore activities or development.

Again, the Migratory Bird Resource list includes only a subset of birds that may occur in your project area. It is not representative of all birds that may occur in your project area. To get a list of all birds potentially present in your project area, please visit the [AKN Phenology Tool](#).

What does IPaC use to generate the probability of presence graphs for the migratory birds potentially occurring in my specified location?

The probability of presence graphs associated with your migratory bird list are based on data provided by the [Avian Knowledge Network \(AKN\)](#). This data is derived from a growing collection of [survey, banding, and citizen science datasets](#).

Probability of presence data is continuously being updated as new and better information becomes available. To learn more about how the probability of presence graphs are produced and how to interpret them, go to the Probability of Presence Summary and then click on the "Tell me about these graphs" link.

How do I know if a bird is breeding, wintering, migrating or present year-round in my project area?

To see what part of a particular bird's range your project area falls within (i.e. breeding, wintering, migrating or year-round), you may refer to the following resources: [The Cornell Lab of Ornithology All About Birds Bird Guide](#), or (if you are unsuccessful in locating the bird of interest there), the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology Neotropical Birds guide](#). If a bird on your migratory bird species list has a breeding season associated with it, if that bird does occur in your project area, there may be nests present at some point within the timeframe specified. If "Breeds elsewhere" is indicated, then the bird likely does not breed in your project area.

What are the levels of concern for migratory birds?

Migratory birds delivered through IPaC fall into the following distinct categories of concern:

1. "BCC Rangewide" birds are [Birds of Conservation Concern](#) (BCC) that are of concern throughout their range anywhere within the USA (including Hawaii, the Pacific Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands);

2. "BCC - BCR" birds are BCCs that are of concern only in particular Bird Conservation Regions (BCRs) in the continental USA; and
3. "Non-BCC - Vulnerable" birds are not BCC species in your project area, but appear on your list either because of the [Eagle Act](#) requirements (for eagles) or (for non-eagles) potential susceptibilities in offshore areas from certain types of development or activities (e.g. offshore energy development or longline fishing).

Although it is important to try to avoid and minimize impacts to all birds, efforts should be made, in particular, to avoid and minimize impacts to the birds on this list, especially eagles and BCC species of rangewide concern. For more information on conservation measures you can implement to help avoid and minimize migratory bird impacts and requirements for eagles, please see the FAQs for these topics.

Details about birds that are potentially affected by offshore projects

For additional details about the relative occurrence and abundance of both individual bird species and groups of bird species within your project area off the Atlantic Coast, please visit the [Northeast Ocean Data Portal](#). The Portal also offers data and information about other taxa besides birds that may be helpful to you in your project review. Alternately, you may download the bird model results files underlying the portal maps through the [NOAA NCCOS Integrative Statistical Modeling and Predictive Mapping of Marine Bird Distributions and Abundance on the Atlantic Outer Continental Shelf](#) project webpage.

Bird tracking data can also provide additional details about occurrence and habitat use throughout the year, including migration. Models relying on survey data may not include this information. For additional information on marine bird tracking data, see the [Diving Bird Study](#) and the [nanotag studies](#) or contact [Caleb Spiegel](#) or [Pam Loring](#).

What if I have eagles on my list?

If your project has the potential to disturb or kill eagles, you may need to [obtain a permit](#) to avoid violating the Eagle Act should such impacts occur.

Proper Interpretation and Use of Your Migratory Bird Report

The migratory bird list generated is not a list of all birds in your project area, only a subset of birds of priority concern. To learn more about how your list is generated, and see options for identifying what other birds may be in your project area, please see the FAQ "What does IPaC use to generate the migratory birds potentially occurring in my specified location". Please be aware this report provides the "probability of presence" of birds within the 10 km grid cell(s) that overlap your project; not your exact project footprint. On the graphs provided, please also look carefully at the survey effort (indicated by the black vertical bar) and for the existence of the "no data" indicator (a red horizontal bar). A high survey effort is the key component. If the survey effort is high, then the probability of presence score can be viewed as more dependable. In contrast, a low survey effort bar or no data bar means a lack of data and, therefore, a lack of certainty about presence of the species. This list is not perfect; it is simply a starting point for identifying what birds of concern have the potential to be in your project area, when they might be there, and if they might be breeding (which means nests might be present). The list helps you know what to look for to confirm presence, and helps guide you in knowing when to implement conservation measures to avoid or minimize potential impacts from your project activities,

should presence be confirmed. To learn more about conservation measures, visit the FAQ "Tell me about conservation measures I can implement to avoid or minimize impacts to migratory birds" at the bottom of your migratory bird trust resources page.



DNR RESPONSE TO COVID-19: For details on adjustments to DNR services, [visit this webpage \(https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/covid-19.html\)](https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/covid-19.html). For information on the state's response, visit the [Minnesota COVID response webpage \(https://mn.gov/covid19/\)](https://mn.gov/covid19/).



[Home \(/index.html\)](#) > [Nature \(/nr/index.html\)](#) > [ETSC \(/ets/index.html\)](#) > [Rare Species Guide \(/rsg/index.html\)](#) >

[Keyword Search \(keyword_search.html\)](#) | [A-Z Search \(a-z_search.html\)](#) | [Filtered Search \(filter_search.html\)](#).

Rare Species Guide: Filtered Search

80 result(s) for *Locations:Itasca; federal endangered; federal threatened; federal candidate; minnesota endangered; minnesota threatened; minnesota special concern; USFS;*

<u>Common name</u>	<u>Scientific name</u>	<u>Group</u>	<u>Federal status</u>	<u>State status</u>
A Bristle-berry	<i>Rubus stipulatus</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDROS1K7A0)	vascular plant	none	endangered
A Caddisfly	<i>Holocentropus milaca</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=IITRI05220)	insect	none	endangered
A Species of Liverwort	<i>Trichocolea tomentella</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=NBHEP3B010)	moss	none	threatened
Allegheny Vine	<i>Adlumia fungosa</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDFUM02010)	vascular plant	none	special concern
American Shore Plantain	<i>Littorella americana</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDPLN01010)	vascular plant	none	special concern
Autumn Fimbr	<i>Fimbristylis autumnalis</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMCYP0B030)	vascular plant	none	special concern
Awlwort	<i>Subularia aquatica</i> ssp. <i>americana</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDBRA2H012)	vascular plant	none	threatened
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABNKC10010)	bird	none	delisted

Barren Strawberry	<u>Waldsteinia fragarioides var. fragarioides (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDROS1S012).</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Big Brown Bat	<u>Eptesicus fuscus (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AMACC04010).</u>	mammal	none	special concern
Black Sandshell	<u>Ligumia recta (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=IMBIV26020).</u>	mussel	none	special concern
Blanding's Turtle	<u>Emydoidea blandingii (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ARAAD04010).</u>	reptile	none	threatened
Blunt-lobed Grapefern	<u>Botrychium oneidense (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PPOPH010C0).</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Bog Adder's Mouth	<u>Malaxis paludosa (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMORC1R070).</u>	vascular plant	none	endangered
Bog Bluegrass	<u>Poa paludigena (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMPOA4Z1W0).</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Bog Rush	<u>Juncus stygius var. americanus (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMJUN012N1).</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Case's Ladies' Tresses	<u>Spiranthes casei var. casei (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMORC2B041).</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Clustered Bur-reed	<u>Sparganium glomeratum (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMSPA01070).</u>	vascular plant	none	delisted
Creek Heelsplitter	<u>Lasmigona compressa (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=IMBIV22020).</u>	mussel	none	special concern
Cuckoo Flower	<u>Cardamine pratensis (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDBRA0K0Z0).</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Discoid Beggarticks	<u>Bidens discoidea (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDAST180L0).</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Eastern Hemlock	<u>Tsuga canadensis (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PGPIN06010).</u>	vascular plant	none	endangered
Eastern candlewax lichen	<u>Ahtiana aurescens (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=NLLEC6C010).</u>	lichen	none	special concern
English Sundew	<u>Drosera anglica (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDDRO02010).</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern

Few-flowered Spikerush	<u>Eleocharis quinqueflora</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Fluted-shell	<u>Lasmigona costata</u>	mussel	none	threatened
Forcipate Emerald	<u>Somatochlora forcipata</u>	insect	none	special concern
Four-toed Salamander	<u>Hemidactylium scutatum</u>	amphibian	none	special concern
Goblin Fern	<u>Botrychium mormo</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Goldie's Fern	<u>Dryopteris goldiana</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Hidden-fruit Bladderwort	<u>Utricularia geminiscapa</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Lapland Buttercup	<u>Ranunculus lapponicus</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Lavender Bladderwort	<u>Utricularia resupinata</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Least Darter	<u>Etheostoma microperca</u>	fish	none	special concern
Least Moonwort	<u>Botrychium simplex</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Little Brown Myotis	<u>Myotis lucifugus</u>	mammal	none	special concern
Mingan Moonwort	<u>Botrychium minganense</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Montane Yellow-eyed Grass	<u>Xyris montana</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Narrow Triangle Moonwort	<u>Botrychium lanceolatum ssp. angustisegmentum</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Necklace Sedge	<u>Carex ormostachya</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern

Nelson's Sparrow	Ammodramus nelsoni (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABPBXA0070).	bird	none	special concern
Northern Bog Lemming	Synaptomys borealis (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AMAFF17020).	mammal	none	special concern
Northern Brook Lamprey	Ichthyomyzon fossor (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AFBAA01030).	fish	none	special concern
Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABNKC12060).	bird	none	special concern
Northern Long-eared Bat	Myotis septentrionalis (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AMACC01150).	mammal	threatened	special concern
Northern Oak Fern	Gymnocarpium robertianum (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PPDRY0D060).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Northern Sunfish	Lepomis peltastes (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AFCQB11130).	fish	none	special concern
Oakes' Pondweed	Potamogeton oakesianus (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMPOT030Q0).	vascular plant	none	endangered
Olivaceous Spikerush	Eleocharis flavescens var. <i>olivacea</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMCYP091A0).	vascular plant	none	threatened
Olive-colored Southern Naiad	Najas guadalupensis ssp. <i>olivacea</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMNAJ01054).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Pale Moonwort	Botrychium pallidum (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PPOPH01130).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Pale Sedge	Carex pallescens (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMCYP03A00).	vascular plant	none	endangered
Pale-footed Horsehair Lichen	Bryoria fuscescens (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=NLTEST5340).	lichen	none	special concern
Peppered moon lichen	Sticta fuliginosa (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=NLLEC4S020).	lichen	none	special concern
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABNKD06070).	bird	none	special concern
Prairie Moonwort	Botrychium campestre (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PPOPH010W0).	vascular plant	none	special concern

Pugnose Shiner	<u>Notropis anogenus</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AFCJB28080).	fish	none	threatened
Purple Martin	<u>Progne subis</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABPAU01010).	bird	none	special concern
Pygmy Snaketail	<u>Ophiogomphus howei</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=IIODO12090).	insect	none	special concern
Ram's Head Orchid	<u>Cypripedium arietinum</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMORC0Q020).	vascular plant	none	threatened
Red Beard Lichen	<u>Usnea rubicunda</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=NLT0030840).	lichen	none	special concern
Red-shouldered Hawk	<u>Buteo lineatus</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABNKC19030).	bird	none	special concern
Robbins' Spikerush	<u>Eleocharis robbinsii</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMCYP091N0).	vascular plant	none	threatened
Sheathed Pondweed	<u>Stuckenia vaginata</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMPOT03140).	vascular plant	none	endangered
Slender Naiad	<u>Najas gracillima</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMNAJ01030).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Small Green Wood Orchid	<u>Platanthera clavellata</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMORC1Y050).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Small White Waterlily	<u>Nymphaea leibergii</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDNYM050J0).	vascular plant	none	threatened
Smooth Lungwort	<u>Lobaria quercizans</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=NLLEC0G090).	lichen	none	delisted
Spiral Ditchgrass	<u>Ruppia cirrhosa</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMRUP01020).	vascular plant	none	special concern
St. Lawrence Grapefern	<u>Botrychium rugulosum</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PPOPH010P0).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Three-stamened Waterwort	<u>Elatine triandra</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDELT02090).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Torrey's Mannagrass	<u>Torreyochloa pallida</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMPOA61030).	vascular plant	none	special concern
Trumpeter Swan	<u>Cygnus buccinator</u> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABNJB02030).	bird	none	special concern

Tubercled Rein Orchid	<u><i>Platanthera flava</i> var. <i>herbiola</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMORC1Y082).</u>	vascular plant	none	threatened
Upswept Moonwort	<u><i>Botrychium ascendens</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PPOPH010S0).</u>	vascular plant	none	endangered
Warmouth	<u><i>Lepomis gulosus</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=AFCQB11040).</u>	fish	none	special concern
Western Jacob's-ladder	<u><i>Polemonium occidentale</i> ssp. <i>lacustre</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PDPLM0E0F4).</u>	vascular plant	none	endangered
White Adder's Mouth	<u><i>Malaxis monophyllos</i> var. <i>brachypoda</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=PMORC1R010).</u>	vascular plant	none	special concern
Yellow Rail	<u><i>Coturnicops noveboracensis</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=ABNME01010).</u>	bird	none	special concern
Yellow specklebelly lichen	<u><i>Pseudocyphellaria holarctica</i> (profile.html?action=elementDetail&selectedElement=NLLEC3B040).</u>	lichen	none	endangered

Filter by group (*select one or more*)

- ☒ all groups
 ☐ amphibian
 ☐ bird
 ☐ fish
 ☐ fungus
 ☐ insect
 ☐ lichen
 ☐ mammal
 ☐ moss
 ☐ mussel
 ☐ reptile
 ☐ snail
 ☐ spider
 ☐ vascular plant

Filter by status (*select one or more*)

Federal

- ☒ federal endangered
☒ federal threatened
☒ federal candidate

State

- ☒ state endangered
☒ state threatened
☒ state special concern
☐ state delisted

Other

- ☐ CITES
☒ USFS Sensitive
☐ all statuses

Filter by location (optional)

Filter by habitat (optional)

Select counties Selected Areas:
Select ECS subsections Itasca (31)
Select watersheds

Select Habitat(s) Selected Habitats:

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Appendix C: Consultation and Coordination Letters

Enclosures:

Project Review Request letter sent to USFWS

Initiation of Section 106 Consultation letter sent to SHPO

Example of Invitation to Consult letter sent to Native American Tribes and Bands

Natural Heritage Request sent to Minnesota DNR

Example of Invitation to Comment and Provide Input letter sent to other Federal, State, and Local Agencies and Organizations



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main St Suite K
PO Box 288
Lowell, Michigan 49331



IN REPLY REFER TO:

10.1 (NOCO)

Project Name: North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach

February 10, 2021

To: Andrew Horton
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Twin Cities Ecological Services Field Office
4101 American Boulevard East
Bloomington, MN 55425
Andrew.Horton@fws.gov

From: Chris Loudenslager, Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-970-7026
Christopher.Loudenslager@nps.gov

Subject: Project Review Request, North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section,
Itasca County, MN

Dear Mr. Horton,

The National Park Service (NPS), North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) is proposing approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail in Itasca County, MN. The Tioga Beach section (the Proposed Project) would be connected on each end to the existing NCT, from an existing trail at Tioga Beach park to Chippewa National Forest at Highway 6. The proposed trail would be natural surface tread (i.e., no pavement, gravel, or concrete) with a prism approximately 4 feet wide and 8 feet high. It also proposes to: utilize existing parking lots, expand one (1) existing parking lot with gravel, create one (1) new parking lot with gravel in an existing grassy open area, construct primitive backcountry campsites, construct at least one (1) boardwalk over a known wetland area, and include wayfinding and interpretive signage. A map of the Proposed Project is enclosed.

While six (6) potential locations for campsites have been identified, only two (2) or three (3) of these would be constructed depending on feasibility and landowner input. The campsites would contain space for a tent, a fire pit (if feasible and permissible), a bench, and a wilderness toilet (i.e., pit with a fiberglass riser/seat). The campsites would be located generally near a natural freshwater source (e.g., stream or pond). Each campsite would be approximately 100 square feet, although only the tent space and fire pit area would be cleared of vegetation.

The Proposed Project would be designed to avoid or minimize impacts to natural and cultural resources to the extent possible. The Proposed Project would be coordinated and constructed in partnership with the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and the NCTA's volunteer Arrowhead Chapter. The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter would conduct all trail construction activity in accordance with the NPS' *North Country Trail Handbook for Planning, Design, Construction, and Maintenance* (2019). Construction would include the removal of brush and small saplings, but it would not involve the cutting of any standing trees



greater than 3 inches diameter at breast height. Existing vehicle cross-roads would be used during construction for access.

Post-construction, the Proposed Project would be open to recreational hiking (i.e., foot-traffic) and backcountry camping. The trail and campsites would be maintained and monitored in partnership with the NCTA and the Arrowhead Chapter. When completed, the Proposed Project would replace approximately 12 miles of the NCT that is currently roadwalk. It would provide a route that offers the visitors varied terrain and exemplifies the scenery and hiking experience in Northeastern Minnesota. It would meet the overarching purpose of the National Scenic Trail system to provide a premier hiking trail and superlative outdoor recreation opportunities.

The NPS intends to prepare a tiered Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Proposed Project in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). An EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was previously completed in 2004 for a broad NCT route in Northeastern Minnesota that is authorized in the *North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act* (HR 1216). The Proposed Project is encapsulated within the 2004 EA, but the NPS has identified it as requiring additional, site-specific NEPA review.

A review of the Proposed Project's potential effects on resources under the jurisdiction of USFWS is required in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A query of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) database indicated the presence or potential presence of the following resources under USFWS jurisdiction on or near the project site: **Canada lynx, northern long-eared bat, and bald eagle.**

Based on the reasons presented above and in the attached Species Conclusion Table, it is anticipated that the Proposed Project would have *no adverse effects* on federally listed species under the regulatory jurisdiction of USFWS. The NPS is consulting separately with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to obtain Natural Heritage data and identify potential impacts to species under the DNR's jurisdiction. The enclosed project review package provides a map of the Proposed Project, the NPS' IPaC query for the Proposed Project, and the NPS' Species Conclusions Table.

Questions or comments about the Proposed Project or species conclusions should be directed to:

Stephanie Liguori, NEPA Specialist
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-302-2005
stephanie_liguori@nps.gov

Thank you for your consideration, comments, and cooperation.

Sincerely,



Chris Loudenslager
Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail

Enclosures:

Proposed Project Map
January 2021 IPaC Query for Proposed Project
Species Conclusion Table for the Proposed Project



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main St Suite K
PO Box 288
Lowell, Michigan 49331



IN REPLY REFER TO:

10.1 (NOCO)

Project name: North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach

March 9, 2021

To: Sarah Beimers
Environmental Review Program Manager
Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office
50 Sherburne Ave, Ste#203
Saint Paul, MN 55155
sarah.beimers@state.mn.us

From: Chris Loudenslager, Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-970-7026
Christopher_Loudenslager@nps.gov

Subject: Initiation of Section 106 Consultation for the Tioga Beach Section of the North Country National Scenic Trail, Itasca County, MN

Dear Ms. Beimers,

The National Park Service (NPS) North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) would like to initiate consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) with your office for the proposed construction of a section of the NCT in Itasca County, MN (the Proposed Project). The NPS anticipates the Proposed Project would be constructed in a phased approach over the next three to five years. The NPS intends to take a phased approach to the Section 106 consultation process for the Proposed Project as park resources, schedules, and funding allow for the review of cultural resources for each contiguous phase of the Proposed Project. For the purposes of this letter, we are asking for concurrence on phase 1 of the Proposed Project. An additional consultation will follow when we are prepared to initiate phase 2.

A map of the Proposed Project is enclosed. The Proposed Project would be approximately 18 miles in length with a corridor approximately four (4) feet wide and eight (8) feet high. It would be connected on each end to the existing NCT, from an existing trail at Tioga Beach Park on its east end to the existing NCT route at State Highway 6 on its west end. The trail tread would be natural surface (i.e., no

pavement, gravel, or concrete). The NPS is also proposing as part of the Proposed Project: the utilization of existing parking lots, the expansion of one (1) existing parking area into a trailhead, the creation of one (1) new trailhead/parking lot with gravel, interpretive and wayfinding signage, at least one (1) boardwalk, and up to four (4) backcountry campsites. The Proposed Project would be designed to avoid impacts to natural and cultural resources. The proposed section of trail would be constructed to the standards set forth in NPS' North Country Trail Handbook for Planning, Design, Construction, and Maintenance (2019) in coordination with the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and the NCTA's volunteer Arrowhead Chapter.

Post-construction, the Proposed Project would be open to recreational hiking (i.e., foot-traffic) and backcountry camping. When completed, the Proposed Project would replace approximately 12 miles of the NCT route that is currently roadwalk. By creating this trail connection, the NPS hopes to improve the scenic and recreational opportunities on the NCT and for the community. It would provide a route that offers the visitors varied terrain and exemplifies the scenery and hiking experience in Northeastern Minnesota. It would meet the overarching purpose of the National Scenic Trail system to provide a premier hiking trail and superlative outdoor recreation opportunities.

Phase 1 of the Proposed Project would include the area from Tioga Beach to Northwoods Trail (a local road). In November of 2020, a contractor conducted a Phase I archaeological survey in accordance with the Secretary of Interior Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation for this phase of the Proposed Project. The Area of Potential Effects (APE) for that survey encompassed a linear distance of approximately five (5) miles at a width of approximately 20 feet, as well as five (5) locations that are being considered for a boardwalk, trailhead/parking lot, or campsite. The intensive inventory did not identify any artifacts, archeological features, or cultural materials within the APE and resulted in no historic properties being identified. A copy of the survey report is enclosed for your review. The NPS intends to conduct another Phase I survey for the additional 13 miles of proposed trail (i.e., phase 2), and we will send that archeological survey to your office for review and comment upon completion.

In accordance with 36 CFR § 800.3(c), we take this opportunity to formally initiate the Section 106 consultation process with you for phase 1 of the Proposed Project. We request your concurrence with the finding of No Historic Properties Affected.

For purposes of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), an Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was previously completed in 2004 for a broad NCT route in Northeastern Minnesota that is authorized in the North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act (HR 1216). The Proposed Project is encapsulated within the 2004 EA, but the NPS has identified it as requiring additional, site-specific review under NEPA. The NPS intends to prepare a tiered EA for the Proposed Project in accordance with NEPA. We are currently in the scoping phase, and we invite you to submit your written comments to the address on the letterhead and in the signature below. Please provide all comments within 30 days of receipt of this letter. Native American Tribes that have or may have cultural sites or traditional cultural places in the project area are

also being contacted during this scoping phase.

Thank you in advance for your comments, and we look forward to hearing from you. If you or your staff have any questions, concerns, or need clarification, please contact:

Luke Jordan
Outdoor Recreation Planner (NPS)
318 E Main Street, Ste #K,
Lowell, MI 49331
616-250-6714
luke_jordan@nps.gov

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris Loudenslager", with a large, stylized loop at the end.

Chris Loudenslager
Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail

Enclosures:

Map of the Proposed Project
Phase I Archeological Investigation Report (Commonwealth Heritage Group, 2020)



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main St Suite K
PO Box 288
Lowell, Michigan 49331



IN REPLY REFER TO:

10.1 (NOCO)

Project Name: North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach

February 10, 2021

To: Amy Burnette, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer
Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe
190 Sailstar Drive NE
Cass Lake, MN 56633
amy.burnette@lojibwe.net

From: Chris Loudenslager, Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-970-7026
Christopher.Loudenslager@nps.gov

Subject: Invitation to Consult, North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section, Itasca County, MN

Dear Ms. Burnette,

The National Park Service (NPS), North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) would like to invite your office to consult under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) on the proposed construction of approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail in Itasca County, MN. The Tioga Beach section (the Proposed Project) would be connected on each end to the existing NCT, from an existing trail at Tioga Beach park to Chippewa National Forest at Highway 6. The proposed trail would be natural surface tread (i.e., no pavement, gravel, or concrete) with a prism approximately 4 feet wide and 8 feet high. It also proposes to: utilize existing parking lots, expand one (1) existing parking lot with gravel, create one (1) new parking lot with gravel in an existing grassy open area, construct primitive backcountry campsites, construct at least one (1) boardwalk over a known wetland area, and include wayfinding and interpretive signage. A map of the Proposed Project is enclosed.

While six (6) potential locations for campsites have been identified, only two (2) or three (3) of these would be constructed depending on feasibility and landowner input. The campsites would contain space for a tent, a fire pit (if feasible and permissible), a bench, and a wilderness toilet (i.e., pit with a fiberglass riser/seat). The campsites would be located generally near a natural freshwater source (e.g., stream or pond). Each campsite would be approximately 100 square feet, although only the tent space and fire pit area would be cleared of vegetation.

The Proposed Project would be designed to avoid or minimize impacts to natural and cultural resources to the extent possible. The Proposed Project would be coordinated and constructed in partnership with the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and the NCTA's volunteer Arrowhead Chapter. The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter would conduct all trail construction activity in accordance with the NPS' *North*



Country Trail Handbook for Planning, Design, Construction, and Maintenance (2019). Construction would include the removal of brush and small saplings, but it would not involve the cutting of any standing trees greater than 3 inches diameter at breast height. Existing vehicle cross-roads would be used during construction for access.

Post-construction, the Proposed Project would be open to recreational hiking (i.e., foot-traffic) and backcountry camping. The trail and campsites would be maintained and monitored in partnership with the NCTA and the Arrowhead Chapter. When completed, the Proposed Project would replace approximately 12 miles of the NCT that is currently roadwalk. It would provide a route that offers the visitors varied terrain and exemplifies the scenery and hiking experience in Northeastern Minnesota. It would meet the overarching purpose of the National Scenic Trail system to provide a premier hiking trail and superlative outdoor recreation opportunities.

At this time, the NPS does not anticipate an adverse effect to cultural resources from the Proposed Project. We are conducting the appropriate cultural resources investigations and consulting with the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) under Section 106 of the NHPA. As part of this process, we also wish to consult with Native American Tribes that have or may have cultural sites or traditional cultural places where the Proposed Project would be implemented. The NPS has identified the Leech Lake Band as a potential consulting party and would like to invite you to consult on the Proposed Project in accordance with 36 CFR 800.2 and Executive Order 13175. If you have interest, we request your response **within 30 days of receipt of this letter** to enable us to complete this phase within the scheduled timeframe.

The NPS also intends to prepare a tiered Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Proposed Project in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). An EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was previously completed in 2004 for a broad NCT route in Northeastern Minnesota that is authorized in the *North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act* (HR 1216). The Proposed Project is encapsulated within the 2004 EA, but the NPS has identified it as requiring additional, site-specific NEPA review.

Questions or comments about the Proposed Project should be directed to:

Stephanie Liguori, NEPA Specialist
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-302-2005
stephanie_liguori@nps.gov

We look forward to and welcome your participation in this analysis.

Sincerely,



Chris Loudenslager
Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail

Enclosures:
Proposed Project Map



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main St Suite K
PO Box 288
Lowell, Michigan 49331



February 9, 2021

To: Lisa Joyal, Endangered Species Review Coordinator
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
500 Lafayette Road, Box 25
St. Paul, MN 55155
Review.NHIS@state.mn.us

From: Stephanie Liguori, NEPA Specialist
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-302-2005
stephanie_liguori@nps.gov

Subject: Natural Heritage Data Request, North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section,
Itasca County, MN

Dear Ms. Joyal,

This letter and enclosures serve as a Natural Heritage Data Request for the proposed construction of approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail in Itasca County, MN. The NPS intends to prepare a tiered Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Tioga Beach section (the Proposed Project) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). An EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was previously completed in 2004 for a broad NCT route in Northeastern Minnesota that is authorized in the *North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act* (HR 1216). The Proposed Project is encapsulated within the 2004 EA, but the NPS has identified it as requiring additional, site-specific NEPA review.

The Proposed Project would be connected on each end to the existing NCT, from an existing trail at Tioga Beach park to Chippewa National Forest at Highway 6. The proposed trail would be natural surface tread (i.e., no pavement, gravel, or concrete) with a prism approximately 4 feet wide and 8 feet high. It also proposes to: utilize existing parking lots, expand one (1) existing parking lot with gravel, create one (1) new parking lot with gravel in an existing grassy open area, construct primitive backcountry campsites, construct at least one (1) boardwalk over a known wetland area, and include wayfinding and interpretive signage. A map of the Proposed Project is enclosed.

While six (6) potential locations for campsites have been identified, only two (2) or three (3) of these would be constructed depending on feasibility and landowner input. The campsites would contain space for a tent, a fire pit (if feasible and permissible), a bench, and a wilderness toilet (i.e., pit with a fiberglass riser/seat). The campsites would be located generally near a natural freshwater



source (e.g., stream or pond). Each campsite would be approximately 100 square feet, although only the tent space and fire pit area would be cleared of vegetation.

The Proposed Project would be designed to avoid or minimize impacts to natural and cultural resources to the extent possible. The Proposed Project would be coordinated and constructed in partnership with the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and the NCTA's volunteer Arrowhead Chapter. The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter would conduct all trail construction activity in accordance with the NPS' *North Country Trail Handbook for Planning, Design, Construction, and Maintenance* (2019). Construction would include the removal of brush and small saplings, but it would not involve the cutting of any standing trees greater than 3 inches diameter at breast height. Existing vehicle cross-roads would be used during construction for access.

Post-construction, the Proposed Project would be open to recreational hiking (i.e., foot-traffic) and backcountry camping. The trail and campsites would be maintained and monitored in partnership with the NCTA and the Arrowhead Chapter. When completed, the Proposed Project would replace approximately 12 miles of the NCT that is currently roadwalk. It would provide a route that offers the visitors varied terrain and exemplifies the scenery and hiking experience in Northeastern Minnesota. It would meet the overarching purpose of the National Scenic Trail system to provide a premier hiking trail and superlative outdoor recreation opportunities.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at the phone number or email contained in the signature below. If sending correspondence via postal mail, please send it to my attention at the address contained in the signature below.

Thank you for your data, comments, and cooperation.

Sincerely,



Stephanie Liguori
NEPA Specialist
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-302-2005
stephanie_liguori@nps.gov

Enclosures:

Proposed Project Map
Natural Heritage Data Request Form
Proposed Project GIS Shapefile



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main St Suite K
PO Box 288
Lowell, Michigan 49331



IN REPLY REFER TO:

10.1 (NOCO)

Project Name: North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach

February 10, 2021

To: Sara Thompson, Forest Recreation Specialist
Itasca County, Park System
1177 LaPrairie Ave
Grand Rapids, MN 55744
sara.thompson@co.itasca.mn.us

From: Chris Loudenslager, Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-970-7026
Christopher.Loudenslager@nps.gov

Subject: Invitation to Comment and Provide Input, North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section, Itasca County, MN

Dear Ms. Thompson,

The National Park Service (NPS), North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) would like to obtain your input and comments concerning any specific cultural or environmental issues or concerns your agency may have on the proposed construction of approximately 18-miles of new hiking trail in Itasca County, MN. The Tioga Beach section (the Proposed Project) would be connected on each end to the existing NCT, from an existing trail at Tioga Beach park to Chippewa National Forest at Highway 6. The proposed trail would be natural surface tread (i.e., no pavement, gravel, or concrete) with a prism approximately 4 feet wide and 8 feet high. It also proposes to: utilize existing parking lots, expand one (1) existing parking lot with gravel, create one (1) new parking lot with gravel in an existing grassy open area, construct primitive backcountry campsites, construct at least one (1) boardwalk over a known wetland area, and include wayfinding and interpretive signage. A map of the Proposed Project is enclosed.

While six (6) potential locations for campsites have been identified, only two (2) or three (3) of these would be constructed depending on feasibility and landowner input. The campsites would contain space for a tent, a fire pit (if feasible and permissible), a bench, and a wilderness toilet (i.e., pit with a fiberglass riser/seat). The campsites would be located generally near a natural freshwater source (e.g., stream or pond). Each campsite would be approximately 100 square feet, although only the tent space and fire pit area would be cleared of vegetation.

The Proposed Project would be designed to avoid or minimize impacts to natural and cultural resources to the extent possible. The Proposed Project would be coordinated and constructed in partnership with the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and the NCTA's volunteer Arrowhead Chapter. The NCTA and Arrowhead Chapter would conduct all trail construction activity in accordance with the NPS' *North*



Country Trail Handbook for Planning, Design, Construction, and Maintenance (2019). Construction would include the removal of brush and small saplings, but it would not involve the cutting of any standing trees greater than 3 inches diameter at breast height. Existing vehicle cross-roads would be used during construction for access.

Post-construction, the Proposed Project would be open to recreational hiking (i.e., foot-traffic) and backcountry camping. The trail and campsites would be maintained and monitored in partnership with the NCTA and the Arrowhead Chapter. When completed, the Proposed Project would replace approximately 12 miles of the NCT that is currently roadwalk. It would provide a route that offers the visitors varied terrain and exemplifies the scenery and hiking experience in Northeastern Minnesota. It would meet the overarching purpose of the National Scenic Trail system to provide a premier hiking trail and superlative outdoor recreation opportunities.

The NPS intends to prepare a tiered Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Proposed Project in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). An EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was previously completed in 2004 for a broad NCT route in Northeastern Minnesota that is authorized in the *North Country National Scenic Trail Route Adjustment Act* (HR 1216). The Proposed Project is encapsulated within the 2004 EA, but the NPS has identified it as requiring additional, site-specific NEPA review.

We are requesting input and comments concerning any specific cultural or environmental issues or concerns your agency may have regarding the Proposed Project and proposed project area. Data that you make available will provide valuable and necessary input into the NEPA analytical process and will be considered for incorporation into the EA. As part of the NEPA process, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, State Historic Preservation Office, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, associated Native American Tribes, local citizens, and relevant others will have opportunities to review and comment on the Proposed Project and EA.

Please provide any comments, concerns, information, studies, or other data you and/or your staff may have regarding the Proposed Project **within 30 days of receipt of this letter** to enable us to complete this phase of the NEPA analysis within the scheduled timeframe.

Questions or comments about the Proposed Project should be directed to:

Stephanie Liguori, NEPA Specialist
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail
318 E Main Street, Suite K
Lowell, MI 49331
616-302-2005
stephanie_liguori@nps.gov

We look forward to and welcome your participation in this analysis.

Sincerely,



Chris Loudenslager
Superintendent
National Park Service, North Country National Scenic Trail

Enclosures:
Proposed Project Map

Appendix D: Existing Conditions Photo Log

Enclosures:

Existing Conditions Photo Log

North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section, Itasca County, MN
Existing Conditions Photo Log



Tioga Beach parking and recreation area¹



Existing gravel parking area proposed for expansion³

North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section, Itasca County, MN
Existing Conditions Photo Log



Grassy area proposed for new gravel parking area¹



Wetland proposed to be crossed with 400-feet of puncheon³

North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section, Itasca County, MN
Existing Conditions Photo Log



Former logging channel proposed to be crossed with 40-foot bridge²



Highway 6 at Chippewa National Forest¹

North Country National Scenic Trail, Tioga Beach Section, Itasca County, MN
Existing Conditions Photo Log



Potential primitive backcountry campsite location²

1. Google Maps, 2019
2. Matt Davis, 2019
3. Matt Davis, 2021