

Pigeon River restoration project underway at Song of the Morning



The Pigeon has become what is described as an eroding gully through sediment laid during a century of restricted flow upstream of a now-removed dam. View shows river flowing down through former pond and continuing under bridge to bottom of image.

Drone photo by Gary Wakenhut

Since removal of the dam, it has become evident that the Pigeon River, running through a hundred years of accumulated sediment, needs some further work to keep it healthy. The following article was provided by Linda Gabby, Golden Lotus board chair, with technical support from Rob Myllyoja, a project manager with Stantec Inc., an international professional design and consulting company.

It's been five years since the 2014 drawdown of the Song of the Morning lake, long known as the Lansing Club Pond, in preparation for dam removal on the Pigeon River in

fall 2015. Both events served as a testimony to what can be accomplished by committed partners determined to achieve a common goal.

The dam was removed under the leadership of Huron Pines in collaboration with a steering committee comprised of members from Golden Lotus, Pigeon River Country Association (PRCA), and Michigan Trout Unlimited, allowing the Pigeon River to establish itself once again as a free-flowing river after more than 100 years.

Although fish passage was accomplished and water temperatures cooled somewhat as a result of dam removal, the channel didn't establish itself quite as expected. Instead, it developed into what Stantec Project Manager Rob Myllyoja called an actively eroding gully with sections of braided channel, that is, with braids or tiny islands of unstable sediment. The river channel is overly wide, with seven-foot vertical banks of accumulated organic sediment in the stretch above the former dam. The banks would inevitably become a source of significant erosion. While dam removal had served as the first step toward restoring the Pigeon River, it became evident that further steps were needed to address these concerns.



Running free since 2015, the Pigeon River has left unstable vertical banks of accumulated organic sediment as high as seven feet. *Photo by Linda Gabby*

Another concern is the loss of hemi-marsh, a 50-50 mix of emergent vegetation and open water. Rob became involved in the project in 2016 when Golden Lotus Board member, Carol Armour, convened a group of community members and resource management professionals to ask how we might replace lost hemi-marsh to encourage the return of migratory birds such as trumpeter swans that for decades had regarded Song of the Morning as their regular stop-over and nesting site. Rob's commitment to the project grew as he observed not only the potential to benefit birds native to marshy areas such as Song of the Morning, but also its potential to improve the health of the river and its aquatic species. That fall DNR and Stantec scientists collected preliminary field data to help define the underlying causes of habitat impairment, assess the conditions threatening the proper functioning of the river, and develop a preliminary concept of how the river and surrounding area could be restored.

From this grew a three-fold vision to implement a Natural Channel Design (NCD) approach that would accelerate the process of restoration that otherwise might have taken decades to achieve. NCD would use observational data from above and below the segment of the river to be restored to provide a template for design of the natural stable condition. The intent of NCD is to mirror the historically unaffected reaches of the river above and below the disturbed site. Recommendations include three integrated components of what would become the Pigeon River Restoration Project.

Sediment Management ~ Reduce the downstream impact of excessive sedimentation from bank collapse and other factors, reduce erosion by improving channel stability, address sequestered sand in the upper impoundment, enhance connectivity to the floodplain, and encourage the growth of native riparian vegetation. Dredge the Song of the Morning sand trap downstream of the former dam, before construction begins and upon completion. By restoring natural river form, gradient, and dimensions, and terracing back some banks, the aim is to dramatically improve habitat and self-sustaining stability of the area.

River Restoration ~ Restore the pattern, dimension, and profile of the river to reduce bank erosion and improve aquatic habitat, water quality and temperature,

riparian vegetation growth, and hydraulic connectivity to the riparian wetlands, ground table, and hyporheic zone (the region of sediment and porous space beneath and alongside the stream bed where groundwater and surface water mix). Redirect the channel so that it flows directly under the bridge to protect the Song of the Morning Retreat Road. Include instream habitat components to help restore the natural river form such as log riffles, deep pools, spawning glides and narrow runs with natural on-site materials. Volunteers have already begun assisting with native plantings at river valley's edge.

Wetland Restoration ~ Improve the number and diversity of bird, amphibian, and turtle species, including threatened species and species of concern known to have nested in the former impoundment area. Implement a landform grading approach to integrate the former pond sediment into the east and west edges of the river valley and create a mosaic of interconnected off-channel oxbow ponds, pools and wetland complexes. Oxbow refers to a curved shape pond, to be placed away from the river channel. Rob explains that river flow currently drains water away from the sediment next to the river, creating a band of upland grassy vegetation instead of vegetation with better rooting depth along the floodplain.

We are hoping to have a final concept design by the end of the year, which will clear the way for permitting and contract bidding in early 2020. A rendering of the concepts will be available in early 2020 on a project-specific website that will be updated with milestones and timelines. If all goes according to plan, construction will begin in late spring 2020.

Golden Lotus is grateful for the support of numerous partners who have been instrumental in moving this project from preliminary concept to something that has taken shape and gathered momentum. Foremost has been the leadership of Project Manager Rob Myllyoja and the substantial financial support of funding partners including the Michigan DNR, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The invaluable commitment and technical support of individuals from those agencies, as well as the collaborative input and support of project stakeholders Joe Jarecki from PRCA, Bryan Burroughs from Michigan Trout Unlimited, and John Walters from the DNR Natural Resources Commission have likewise

been tremendously important. Finally, project partner Patrick Ertel from MDNR and Project Coordinator Aaron Snell from Streamside Ecological Services have provided considerable direction and ongoing support that have been key to moving the project forward.

The support of these funding partners and stakeholders attests to the shared vision and belief in the potential benefits of this project. Golden Lotus would especially like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to Joe Jarecki, who has gathered critical monitoring data for quite some time with his wife Judi, and to the members of PRCA, who have followed this project through thick and thin for ten plus years.

--Linda Gabby

State adds 2,103 acres next to, but not part of, PRC

After nearly two decades of trying, Michigan has acquired 2,103 acres of core elk herd range to add to the Pigeon River Country (PRC) for use by all its citizens seeking recreation in its remote woods and waters.

Known as Storey Lake property for its 8-acre lake, the land is nestled between the 106,000-acre PRC State Forest and a large tract of state forest land in the DNR's Gaylord Forest Management Unit. It contains the entire Storey Lake, 30-35 feet deep, and about a mile of Stewart Creek, a designated brook trout stream that feeds into the Sturgeon River.

At least initially, it will be managed as a special unit through the PRC unit manager, but not officially part of Pigeon River Country. So the Advisory Council will not be involved in its management, according to Scott Whitcomb, who recently left as PRC unit manager for a DNR post in Lansing. It is expected there will be some motorized vehicle access allowed, in contrast with Green Timbers on the other side of Fontinalis Road, which is walk-in only and is part of the PRC.

The hybrid status of Storey Lake property is similar to the Hackett Lake property acquired a dozen years ago and managed through the PRC unit manager but not part of the PRC. Hackett Lake property northeast of the PRC was acquired by the state during intense conflict about

regulating horseback use in the PRC, so the DNR kept it separate to enable freer use by equestrians than would be the case under Pigeon River Country's Concept of Management, the only Michigan state forest to have such a time-honored management policy in place.

Nearby state land outside the PRC boundaries offers alternative locations for uses that can be disruptive. For instance, regarding commercial use, the Concept of Management says, "If there are reasonable alternatives to conduct the activity outside of the PRC, applicants should be encouraged to look elsewhere." Overall, the Concept says recreational activity in the Pigeon should, among other things, "not degrade or be inconsistent with the wild character of the PRC" and "should be associated with experiencing the wild character of the PRC."

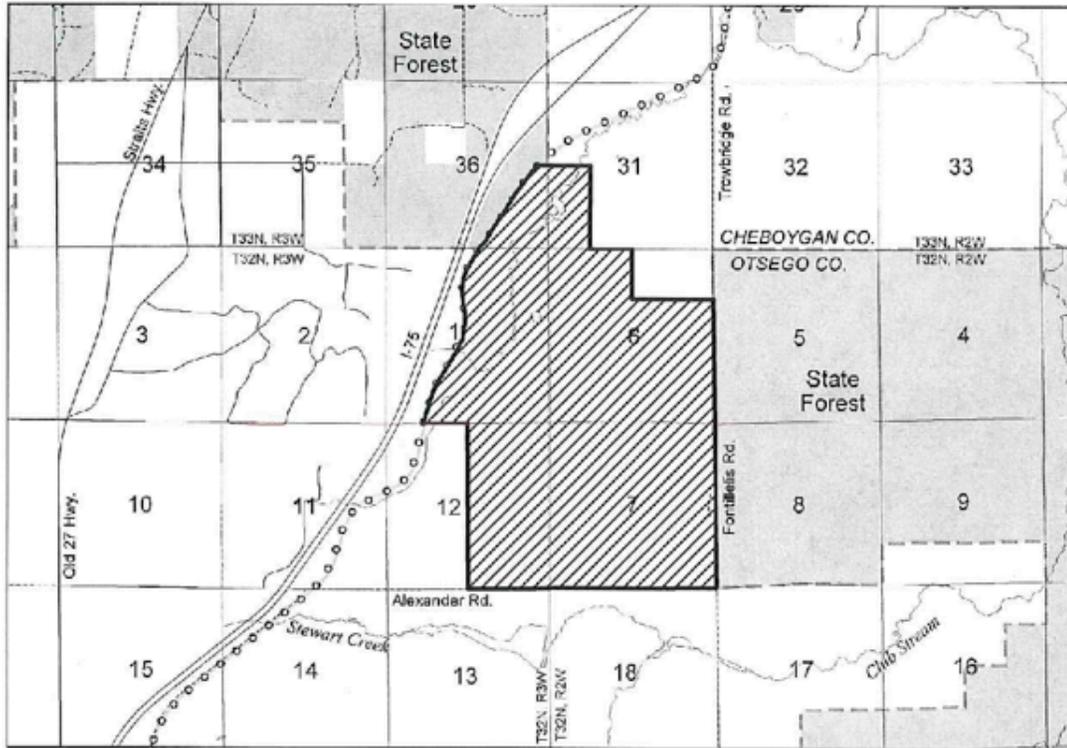
I-75 runs right through the spread of adjacent state holdings that Storey Lake property creates by being nestled between PRC's Green Timbers on one side and Gaylord DNR land on the other. Scott Whitcomb says there is no current plan to make the crossing of I-75 safer for elk because of anticipated high costs of structures as used in some locations out west. A dozen elk die each year in I-75 traffic. Black Bear Golf Club is also known to attract elk to cross from east to west over the interstate highway. The Storey Lake property is



Storey Lake property lies adjacent to Green Timbers along Fontinalis Road west to I-75. *Photo from Michigan DNR*

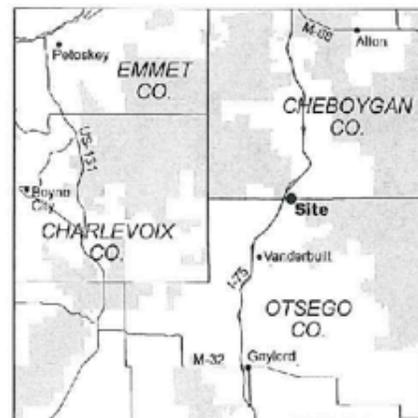
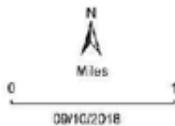
FOREST RESOURCES LAND ACQUISITION

Pigeon River Country Management Unit – Cheboygan and Otsego Counties
Land Transaction Case #20180156



Sections 6 and 7, T32N, R02W, Corwith Township, Otsego County
 Sections 1 and 12, T32N, R03W, Corwith Township, Otsego County
 Section 31, T33N, R02W, Nunda Township, Cheboygan County
 Section 36, T33N, R03W, Wilmot Township, Cheboygan County

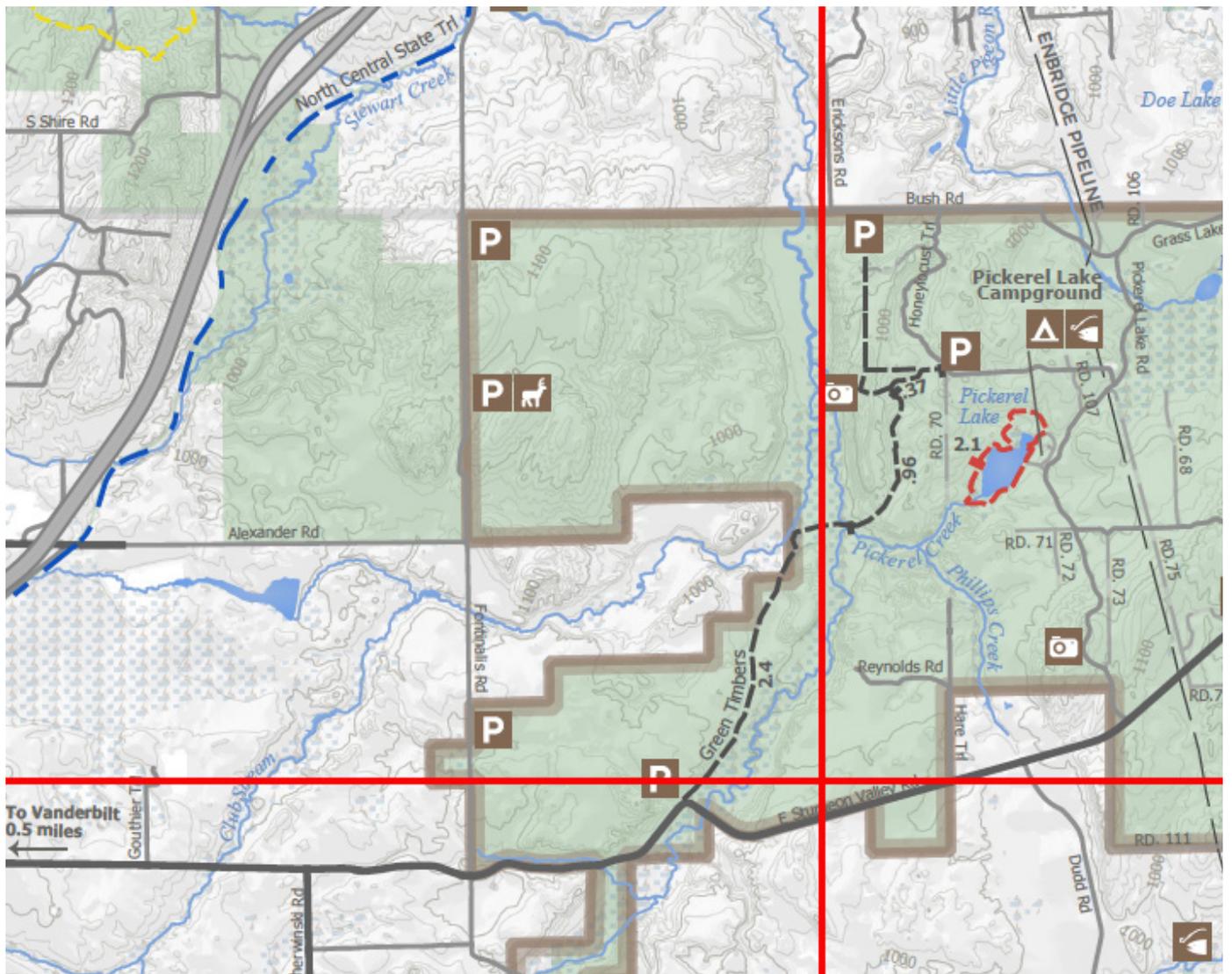
- Land to be acquired by DNR (2,103 acres)
- State land
- Private land
- DNR Project Boundary
- North Central Trail



DNR Project Boundaries

accessible on the north side of Alexander Road and the west side of Fontinalis Road. The North Central State Trail runs along its west-northwest boundary adjacent to I-75. That trail is for non-motorized use by bicycles and pedestrians, plus snowmobiles in winter.

In a press release, the DNR said the land is open for all legal hunting, fishing, trapping, camping, hiking, wildlife viewing, bird-watching, berry-picking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and outdoor pursuits. All nonmotorized use is welcome. Motorized use is limited until the DNR



The PRCA's topo map printed in summer 2019 did not identify the Storey Lake area pending purchase of the land by the state, but maps sold from now on will include the property outline, lying north of Alexander Road and west of Fontinalis Road, adjacent to the Green Timbers portion of the PRC.



Entrance to Storey Lake property on west side of Fontinalis Road.
Photo by Dale Franz



Stump offers a glimpse into the past of Storey Lake property.
Photo by Sandra Franz



View of Storey Lake property looking west from Green Timbers access parking area on Fontinalis Road.

Photo by Dale Franz

completes an inventory of the existing roads on the property and develops an access plan.

Kerry Wieber, forest land administrator for the DNR, said the Storey Lake property offers abundant opportunities to view other wildlife and birds. Its rare species include bald eagle, northern goshawk, red-shouldered hawk, and the Massasauga rattlesnake, which because of loss of habitat was recently listed as threatened. The property has varied terrain elevations and is dotted with cedar, pine, and hardwoods that have recently been thinned by private timber sales.

The DNR said it completed the \$3.8 million property purchase with a \$912,500 grant from the Michigan Natural Resource Trust Fund, plus money from the state's Land Exchange Facilitation and Management Fund generated by the sale of surplus state forest land in Iosco County to United States Gypsum. The trust fund is royalty money coming to the state since the Pigeon River Country oil and gas development compromise in 1976. See Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund for more about the fund. The Storey Lake property was formerly owned by a family in Switzerland. It currently has a pavilion and rustic restrooms by the lake.

Scott Whitcomb says the family was not very active as hunters, but in the 1980s was very active feeding deer and elk. Gas wells on the property have been plugged. There is at least one utility box, perhaps with underground electric power.

Kerry Wieber has said it is unlikely any timber harvest would occur right away, since trees have been cut there in the last few years.



A future steward of the PRC. That's how Rudi Edel describes this youngster reading the kiosk just finished at the North Central State Trail pavilion in Vanderbilt. Using generous donations of materials and professional labor, Pigeon River Country Discovery Center volunteers built and now will manage the kiosk. Photo by Jan Kellogg

Pigeon manager promoted to Lansing

Scott Whitcomb, the revered manager of Pigeon River Country State Forest, has left after 11 years to advise the new director of Michigan's Department of Natural Resources, Dan Eichinger, in Lansing as senior adviser on public land and wildlife issues statewide.

Dan Eichinger was appointed by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in December 2018. Scott began his new Lansing job in September 2019. Greg Rekowski, a PRC forester, has become acting unit manager of PRC.



Scott Whitcomb
Photo by Dale Franz

Among the new duties for Scott, 51, is directing the DNR's planning and response to climate change. His background is in wildlife management. One of his latest high-profile jobs, in addition to managing the Pigeon, was overseeing a survey of what roads would be open or closed to vehicular traffic in the state's northern forests.

His earliest memories as a child were of years spent at a DNR research cabin on High Island in Lake Michigan. Later his family lived in Wolverine, where he spent time recreating in the Pigeon River Country State Forest. He earned a bachelor's degree in Fisheries and Wildlife from Michigan State University and a master's degree in Wildlife Management from University of Maine. Scott spent five years in the Appalachians of southwest Virginia managing state wildlife areas. He returned to Michigan in 1998, beginning work in the DNR as a biologist in Lansing working on special projects and then became the statewide Public Lands Specialist for Wildlife Division. Scott transferred to the DNR's Forest Resources Division and moved back north to manage the Pigeon River County State Forest beginning in December of 2008.

He told the Gaylord Herald Times his years working with diverse user groups in the Pigeon helped earn him his new role in Lansing. Among those users are hunters, anglers,

backpackers, horseback and off-road vehicle riders, and other visitors.

He will keep his Petoskey home while working from the fifth floor of a building next to the state capitol in Lansing. He and his wife, Marty, have four adult children.

Eichinger said in an email. “I’m confident that Scott’s strong background, commitment to collaboration and experience in public lands and natural resources management will help move the department forward in several critical areas.” The two worked together for a time in the DNR’s Wildlife Division.

Scott says his biggest success has been working with volunteers who opened the PRC Discovery Center, which began receiving visitors Memorial Day weekend 2017. He told the Herald Times, “Everyone who goes through there is impressed with the quality of the exhibits and the whole Pigeon River story is a lot more in depth than people know. The story and circumstances of the past affect how we manage it today and the Discovery Center tells that story.”

He told us, “I considered it a privilege when I was still in college to add my name to those that worked in the Big Wild. And then to actually be able to come back to an area that I spent time as a child and work there is surreal and an opportunity that I will treasure always. And then further, to be able to work closely with such passionate individuals that I now call friends is all you can ask of your career. Not a day goes by that I don’t think fondly about my time in the Pigeon River Country.”

His email address remains whitcombs@michigan.gov.

A second figure moves on

Along with Scott Whitcomb, Brad Garmon has been a pioneering member of the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center steering committee named to an executive post in Lansing, and thus brings an appreciation of the PRC’s special qualities to statewide leadership in environmental policy. Brad has been named director of a new Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry.

Within a few weeks of his appointment, Brad was in Utah to sign Michigan on to the Confluence of States

Accords with the goals of improving public health by getting more people outside, partnering with industry to grow outdoor recreation jobs, and aiming for stewardship of natural resources. While he was a member of the PRC Advisory Council, he headed up a committee to propose educational activities that could help build ongoing public support for the Pigeon River Country, an effort that manifested in work he and other volunteers put into practice with the Discovery Center.



Brad Garmon

Photo from Michigan DNR

Garmon was interim CEO of the Michigan Environmental Council in Lansing until his appointment. He is past director of the Community Economic Development Association of Michigan and the Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance. Garmon currently sits on the board of directors of the Michigan Mountain Biking Association and is a member of Michigan Trout Unlimited. He holds undergraduate degrees in Geology/Earth Science and Geospatial Analysis and a master's degree in English.

His website is Michigan.gov/Mi-OutdoorRec

Forester steps in to manage Pigeon River Country

Forester Greg Rekowski has become acting unit manager for the PRC with the departure of Scott Whitcomb to a post in Lansing. Greg has been a PRC forester since 2012. He

grew up in Indian River, MI and graduated from Inland Lakes High School in 2002.

He was graduated from the University of Michigan in 2006 with a BA in environmental science. He then worked various internships and temporary forestry jobs, including with the US Forest Service, Douglas County Forestry Department in Wisconsin, and the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point.



Greg Rekowski
Photo by Dale Franz

In 2009, he returned to Michigan Tech University and received a masters in Forestry in 2010. He was hired by the Michigan DNR in 2011 and worked at the Atlanta Field Office before transferring to the PRC. He says he enjoys spending as much time with his daughter, 8, as he can, and also plays and watches sports, camps, hikes, fishes, hunts, and continues learning about trees and forests.

Discovery Center wins national award

The Pigeon River Country Discovery Center received the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)'s Award of Excellence this year, one of only 50 such awards conferred in the entire United States. Now in its 74th year, the AASLH's Award of Excellence is considered the most prestigious recognition for achievement in the preservation and interpretation of state and local history. The winners represent the best in the field and provide leadership for the future of state and local history.

For its part, the Pigeon River Country Discovery Center says it hopes to create a new generation of stewards and advocates by educating forest visitors of all ages about the forest's singular history. The multi-format, tactile exhibits are supported by educational programs, videos, a website, Facebook page, detailed maps, and a forest interpretive trail created in conjunction with the DC. They illustrate that all of us—families, recreationists, resource professionals, school children, and casual visitors—have a voice, and can make a difference, in environmental issues.

Boosting natural forest cover with fire

The DNR conducted a controlled burn of 122 acres in the northwest quadrant at the intersection of Sturgeon Valley Road and Twin Lakes Road on Wednesday July 10, 2019. Some flames were visible for a few days to drivers headed to or from PRC headquarters along the usual route to or from Vanderbilt. Forester Greg Rekowski provides the following report.

There were about 15 of us working on the burn. A bulldozer and three smaller fire engines patrolled the roads during the burn. Ignition started around noon and was completed around 4 p.m. Fire personnel stayed for several hours after to put out areas that were still burning near the road. Fire personnel returned to the site each morning for an additional four or five days to put out logs that were still smoldering along the road.

The area we burned is part of a much larger Special Conservation Area (SCA) that is centered around the intersection of Twin Lakes and Sturgeon Valley Roads.



Forest reclaims its verdant look after controlled burn in a highly visible stretch along Twin Lakes Road.

Photo by Dale Franz

The SCA is predominantly composed of red and white pine stands, some planted in the CCC days and some of natural origin. The objective of the SCA is to promote mature conifer forest conditions which can be achieved by letting natural processes occur and retaining large diameter trees.

The designation as an SCA does not preclude timber harvesting: some areas have been thinned over the years and will continue to be in the future, while others will be left alone for the foreseeable future. The hope is that one day this area may somewhat resemble what the vast pine stands of Michigan looked like prior to European settlement.

In these pre-settlement forests, fire was a common disturbance agent but since the early 1900's has been absent from this area. The main purpose of the burn was

to return fire to the landscape and attempt to replicate what a low-intensity “natural” fire would have looked like. Fire intensity varied throughout the day of the burn, which created a “mosaic” of burn conditions. Some areas did not burn very hot and will have minor impacts to the vegetation. Areas that burned hotter, such as near Sturgeon Valley Road, resulted in mortality of some mature trees, which will provide dead snags for wildlife habitat and create more light conditions at the forest floor for tree regeneration.

--Greg Rekowski



At the Pigeon River Country 100 year celebration on Oct. 18, Dave Smethurst, center, was honored for being a continuous member of the Advisory Council since its first meeting 45 years ago. Others are (l-r) Paul Rose, Advisory Council chair; Peter Gustafson, past chair; Ned Caveney, first PRC area forester; and Dan Eichinger, DNR director.

Photo from Michigan DNR



Director Eichinger (r) talks with (l-r) Scott Whitcomb; Scott's father, Doug Whitcomb, retired wildlife biologist; and Joe Jarecki, Scott's predecessor as unit manager and the last one to live in what is now the Discovery Center.

Photo from Michigan DNR

Membership renewal reminder

Membership dues help provide a scholarship to a student intern who assists the forest manager in the summer, and help us protect the wild character of the PRC. Your membership expiration date is on your mailing label or email sending this newsletter. Please keep your membership current. Thank you!



Visit our websites at www.pigeonriver.org
<https://pigeonriverdiscoverycenter.org>

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