

File Code: 1950

Date: July 11, 2024

Dear Interested Parties, Agencies, and Organizations,

I am writing to provide you with an update on the topic of **Minnesota School Trust lands that are located within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW)**. Federal wilderness restrictions complicate the State of Minnesota's ability to manage approximately 80,000 acres of School Trust lands within the BWCAW for long-term economic return. Multiple attempts have been made over decades to address this issue.

In 2012, the Forest Service received a request from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to initiate a land exchange for approximately 30,000 acres of state lands in the Wilderness in exchange for federal lands of equal value from a pool of approximately 39,000 acres outside the Wilderness. An environmental impact statement (EIS) process was initiated in 2015 to analyze the School Trust Land Exchange project (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/superior/?project=45943>). A draft EIS for this proposed exchange was published in 2017. Since then, through public comments received and tribal consultation, we have considered a variety of viewpoints on the exchange proposal. Several issues have arisen with the original exchange. These considerations informed a decision by the state of Minnesota to withdraw its request for a land exchange. The withdrawal letter was received by the Forest Service in May of 2024. The letter will be published to the Minnesota DNR, School Trust webpage on July 12 for public reference.

Land exchanges require two willing parties. Because the state of Minnesota has withdrawn its request for exchange, this is no longer the case. Accordingly, the School Trust Land Exchange is no longer a viable project and I find reason to cancel the EIS. This is documented in the Federal Register Notice anticipated for publication on July 12.

I greatly appreciate the public participation in the EIS process and the hard work over decades that has gone into resolving the issue of School Trust lands within the BWCAW.

Going forward, the Forest Service is proposing a purchase of the approximately 80,000 acres of School Trust lands within the BWCAW, as noted in the state of Minnesota's letter withdrawing its request for a land exchange. In addition, the Forest Service has the opportunity to purchase approximately 15,000 acres of land within the proclamation boundary of the Forest, outside the BWCAW, from The Conservation Fund (TCF). These TCF lands were previously intended to be involved in a purchase transaction involving the 50,000 acres of School Trust lands in the BWCAW that were not included in the School Trust Land Exchange.

We will provide more information on these two proposed land purchases and invite public input on them soon. We will notify the public when information on the proposed purchases is available for review and input. I anticipate analyzing and making a decision on these proposed purchases using a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act.



If you have any questions, please contact Trevor Peck, Special Projects Manager at trevor.peck@usda.gov, 801-823-5138, or Barb Thompson, Lands and Special Uses Program Manager, barbara.thompson@usda.gov, 218-365-7618.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "T. B. Hall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the first part.

THOMAS HALL
Forest Supervisor