

I. INTRODUCTION - Felton Prairie Stewardship Plan

This plan records the issues, analysis, and recommendations of the Felton Prairie Stewardship Committee concerning 2,900 acres of publicly held land east of Felton, Minnesota in Clay County (Fig. 1). Members of the committee include representatives of Clay County government, the aggregate industry, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), University of Minnesota at Crookston, Minnesota State University at Moorhead and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The Felton Prairie Stewardship Committee continued the work of the Clay County Beach Ridges Forum after it concluded in 1997. The committee drafted a project proposal in 1998 for consideration by the Legislative Committee on Minnesota Resources (LCMR). They received funding in 1999 and held regular meetings from 1999 to 2001 to develop a stewardship plan. Their efforts and this document were funded in 1999 by the Minnesota Legislature as recommended by the LCMR. This grant also funded an aggregate resource evaluation used for planning purposes in this document and the reclamation of a depleted gravel pit in the area under consideration.

The purpose of the Felton Prairie Stewardship Plan is outlined in the funded work plan:

“This project will result in a site-specific stewardship plan for 2900 acres [*sic*] of public land within the Felton Prairie Complex with special emphasis on the 800 acres which may contain both prairie and gravel. The plan will provide for gravel mining, reclamation, prairie restoration and prairie preservation opportunities,” (Felton Prairie Stewardship Committee, 1999).

A. Challenges & Opportunities

The need for this plan arises from land use conflicts. The origin of these conflicts will be described in greater detail elsewhere in this document; but in simple terms, it results from the co-location of valuable and scarce resources: native prairie and concrete-grade aggregate. Beneath portions of the prairie where endangered species breed and fulfill their life cycles lies high quality aggregate. If you mine the gravel, you eliminate the prairie and threaten or eliminate the species dependent on it. This is one example of the many linkages that exist at Felton Prairie. The stewardship committee identified these challenges:

1. Conflict between biological resource protection and society’s need for aggregate,
2. Effects of multiple property owners on management coordination,
3. Meeting Clay County’s aggregate needs for road maintenance.

Along with the challenges, the committee has identified these opportunities:

1. Realize the economic value of the county’s gravel deposit;
2. Reclaim abandoned spoil piles and gravel pits;
3. Preserve native grassland communities and restore disturbed land;
4. Coordinate management efforts for native grassland communities and rare species;
5. Improve the potential for eco-tourism in the area. (Insufficient time was available to develop this opportunity in the plan.)

In order to address these challenges and opportunities, the Felton Prairie Stewardship Committee met from 1997-2001 to propose and develop a stewardship plan for public lands in Felton Prairie. The term “stewardship” is used rather than “management” for a number of reasons. First, given the challenges and opportunities listed, the committee needs to view the area holistically from economic, social, and ecological perspectives. The term “stewardship” evokes a longer time horizon than “management” and requires less specificity in recommendations. It also implies the custodial responsibility we have in the present to provide for generations in the future. How can the resources, both mineral and biological, be managed or balanced for the long-term benefit of citizens in Clay County and the state of Minnesota?

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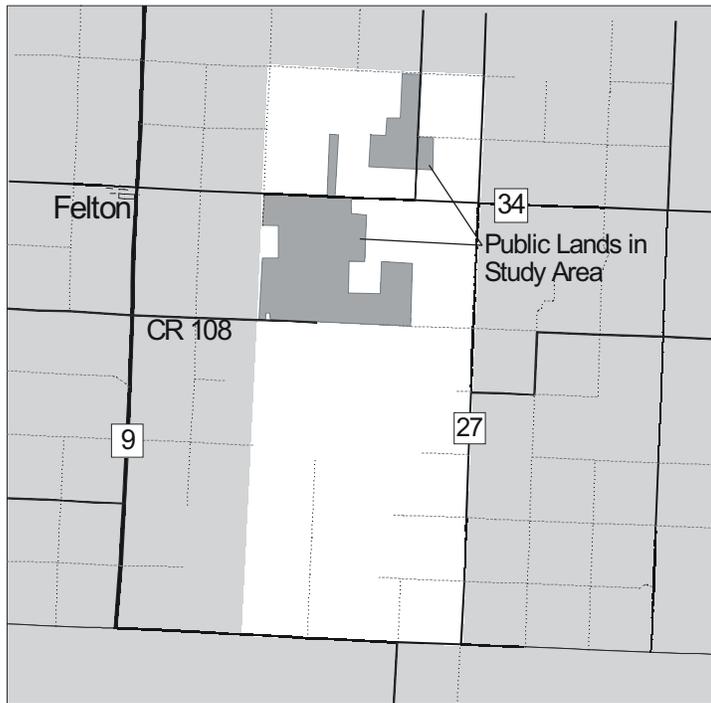


Figure 1: Location of Felton Prairie area in Clay County (below) and cluster of public lands found in the study area (above).

The stewardship plan recommends land use activities for the parcels identified in Figure 2. All of these lands are owned or managed by public entities, specifically Clay County, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR), and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Clay County owns the aggregate mining site labeled “A” in Figure 2. From it they supply road gravel to maintain county and township owned roads. The Nature Conservancy owns Blazing Star Prairie and manages it as a Scientific and Natural Area (SNA) in partnership with DNR. DNR also manages State School Trust Fund lands to generate income for education funding. Aggregate Industries leases and mines the aggregate on State School Trust Fund land (labeled B) in Hagen Township. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) holds a conservation easement on the DNR property (Flowing Township, Section 1) known as the Zillmer site. With the exception of USFWS, all of these entities have representatives on the committee and all have had an opportunity to provide information and advocacy for different points of view. The activities recommended by this plan for these lands will include aggregate mining, aggregate mine reclamation, prairie restoration, and preservation consistent with the LCMR project proposal. Unlike a traditional management or mining plan, a plan of action and maintenance will not be covered by this document. The owners and managers of these resources are ultimately responsible for management and utilization of these resources. The committee’s recommendations reflect the interests of all parties involved but implementation responsibility and coordination rests with the public landholders.

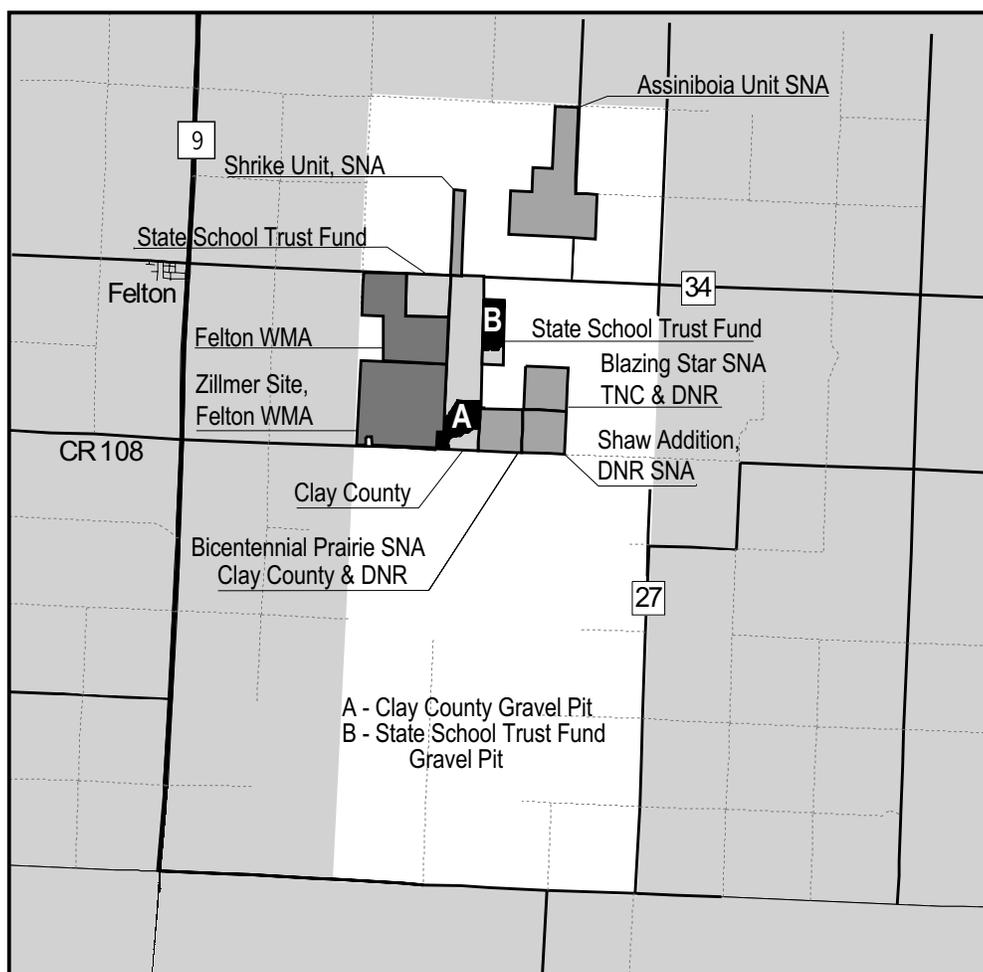


Figure 2: Public lands in study area; the area labeled (A) is the Clay County gravel pit, and (B) is the State School Trust Fund site leased to Aggregate Industries (formerly Camas) for mining gravel.

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B. Clay County Beach Ridges Forum

Concern for the future of prairie lands and aggregate mining in Clay County was addressed by the Beach Ridges Forum organized in 1995 by DNR and funded by LCMR. A series of meetings were held from January 1996 to June 1997 for anyone interested in prairie or aggregate resources in Clay County. Participants represented prairie preservation interests, the aggregate industry, private landowners, and units of government. The prairie and aggregate resources in the county were compiled and analyzed using a geographic information system and the participants were able to discuss their concerns and ideas in a neutral setting. Their mission was:

“To identify and recommend ways to achieve a balance between the protection of our natural prairie heritage and environmentally yet economically sound gravel mining opportunities through appropriate land use management,” (MN DNR, Report, 1997).

The Forum identified Felton Prairie as having high gravel potential as well as 40% of the high to medium biodiversity prairie found in the eastern part of the county based on the biological survey data. The document recognizes that Felton Prairie “represents the best and largest example of dry prairie remaining in the state,” (MN DNR, Report, 1997).

The Forum concluded with a series of general recommendations that pertain to this stewardship plan:

- Maximize utilization of aggregate resources whenever possible;
- Sample aggregate deposits to identify the presence of economically valuable deposits on certain public lands to assist in long-term management;
- Reclaim abandoned gravel mining sites on both private and public lands;
- Develop mining and reclamation plans for active operations on both private and public lands;
- Promote the concept of progressive reclamation whenever possible;
- Use prairie grasses and forbs for gravel pit reclamation whenever possible;
- Acknowledge the ongoing need to work in partnership to continue the efforts begun by this Forum.

And a specific action item directly affected Felton prairie:

“The Forum recommends that a proposal be written and funding sought for a rotosonic drilling program to be conducted on certain public lands within the Felton prairie with high quality prairie on the surface to determine the presence of an economically-recoverable aggregate resource,” (MN DNR, Report, 1997).

The Felton Prairie Stewardship Committee should be viewed as a continuation of the Beach Ridges Forum with the specific intention of developing a land use plan for 2,900 acres of public land in Felton Prairie. The committee applied for and received an LCMR grant funding the plan, the rotosonic drill study, reclamation of the depleted mine on the Zillmer site (acquired by DNR in 1991) and development of an interpretation site for the public.

C. Planning Process

The Felton Prairie Stewardship Committee met on a regular basis to review the data available on aggregate and biological resources. Needing more information, the committee oversaw a rotosonic drill study and obtained additional information on rare seepage wetlands found in the study area. They have followed the same basic steps of inventory, analysis, formulation of alternatives, impacts, and recommendations as a traditional planner would, but in a less formulaic, prescribed manner. Conflicting issues were debated openly by those concerned with prairie preservation and those involved with gravel mining in the area. The process may have taken longer than a traditional plan but it embodies the compromises and opinions of a diverse group of advocates.