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## Hunters, riders, skiers all covet a piece of new park

By **SARAH LEMAGIE**, Star Tribune

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Hunters are lining up for deer permits. Pheasant lovers want a bigger share of the field. Horseback riders are curious about a possible new trail that would get them out of hunting terrain. And gun enthusiasts on a nearby shooting range want to make sure the new trail wouldn't bring the horses too close to their bullets.

It's all part of the juggling act that the University of Minnesota and state Department of Natural Resources are performing to meet the sometimes competing desires of visitors to Vermillion Highlands, a new and uniquely managed natural area on the southern 2,800 acres of the university's UMore Park in Rosemount.

"It's a tough balance," Bob Fashingbauer, a DNR wildlife area manager, said at a Rosemount community meeting last week that drew about 75 people interested in the future of UMore Park.

Two years ago, the U traded Vermillion Highlands to the state for increased funding of its new football stadium under construction in Minneapolis. The Legislature agreed to pay about \$10.25 million a year for 25 years for the stadium.

At the end of that time, the state will get the land, which is now overseen by the U and the DNR.

The deal sets aside a swath of land that -- along with nearby property bought this summer for a proposed regional park and DNR land along the Vermillion River -- totals more than 4,000 acres. At nearly five times the size of New York's Central Park, it's the kind of investment that future residents will look back on with wonder, said Rosemount Mayor Bill Droste.

But today, he said, "People aren't aware of these areas, and it's wonderful, pristine land."

The rolling hills and farmland of Vermillion Highlands has been sparsely used for years by horseback riders, hikers, cross-country skiers and illegal hunters. Yet interest in the land may already be growing. Land managers are planning new trails and gradually allowing more hunting, and the university is drawing attention to the area with long-range plans for a community of up to 30,000 people on the northern half of UMore Park.

Since April, the university has sold 53 annual trail passes at Vermillion Highlands, more than double the number sold in the entire previous year. And when the DNR allowed deer hunting in the area for the first time last fall, 850 people applied for 30 archery permits.

"It got crazy last year," said Fashingbauer, who had 25 to 40 people calling a day with questions about the season.

The DNR has opened Vermillion Highlands to limited deer, pheasant and turkey hunting. This year, they're adding late-season goose hunting and trapping for fur-bearing animals such as coyotes and raccoons.

Some hunters are eager for more opportunities, including Dan Richmond, Hastings chapter president of Pheasants Forever, which pitched the UMore land trade idea to legislators in 2006. Richmond, who doesn't want the area to become a "private trophy hunting club" for a few deer hunters, says he would like to see more bird hunting in Vermillion Highlands, as well as the chance to restore native prairie habitat.

But "the last thing we want to do is have an accident and have hunting shut down forever," said Fashingbauer, who asked residents for patience as land managers figure out long-term plans for what's basically a new kind of parkland.

The deal cut between the state and the U calls for an unusual mix of research, recreation and wildlife habitat. Unlike traditional wildlife management areas, Vermillion Highlands allows activities such as horseback riding, target shooting at a designated site and agricultural research. Hunting is regulated more closely.

Until plans are set, there's no point in spending money to plant prairie grass, for example, and running the risk that the university might claim the same plot for bean research in five years, Fashingbauer said.

Draft plans for Vermillion Highlands that were released for public comment this summer call for more parking and bathrooms, a bike trail from Lebanon Hills Regional Park, new trails and a shooting range at an existing site used by a private gun club.

A new equestrian trail in the northern part of Vermillion Highlands could be built as soon as this fall, depending on what users say they want, Fashingbauer said.

The new trail would move horses out of an area tagged for hunting and enable riders to use the land year-round. But some riders who board horses at a nearby ranch and cut cross-country to join existing gravel and dirt paths want to know more about how long the new trail would be and how riders would get to it.

"I am concerned about the length," said Sue Schedin, an Eagan resident who rides her horses in the area two or three times a week.

But many improvements could take years to build, Fashingbauer said. For now, Vermillion Highlands is "still kind of out of the way, and a little unknown," he said. From the head of the Lone Rock trail, "You can walk for a long, long time and not see anyone."

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