

OUTDOORS

No trespassing at Cuyuna Country? Land dispute could block popular mountain bike trail.

Access to key route is being threatened in disagreement with DNR over cabin project in the recreation area.

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The Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area drew more than 400,000 visitors in 2023, with tens of thousands mountain biking on its expansive trail system. (Aaron Lavinsky/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

A land dispute at one of Minnesota's most popular outdoor playgrounds could hold up mountain bikers and others who will begin heading there by the thousands in the months

ahead.

Tim and Dawn Prinsen of Minneapolis are in a disagreement with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources over property – and property rights – in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area.

The conflict could result in “no trespassing” signs that would affect access to a signature trail in the Ironton area. The Galloping Goose is an easy 6-mile path where many mountain bikers get their introduction to the recreation area’s expansive trail network.

In a Feb. 19 letter to the DNR, the Prinsens asked the agency to block access and put up signage by March 3 because of liability concerns. The action is the latest chapter in the Prinsens’ dispute with the state agency over the couple’s effort to develop cabins on private property nearby and within the recreation area.

The DNR responded that it won't put up signage on the strip of land, which includes part of the Galloping Goose path as well as Overburden Road and a parking area.

"This is the last step we wanted to take but only step to take at this point," Tim Prinsen told the Minnesota Star Tribune last week of possibly cordoning off the area.

When access might be denied is uncertain. The trails are currently closed until after the spring thaw.

The dispute has rippled beyond the recreation area's boundaries: A central Minnesota lawmaker is introducing legislation in hopes of brokering an agreement between the Prinsens and the DNR.

The couple are watching closely, Prinsen said, as they consider next steps.

Pursuing a cabin project

The complex affair goes back to April 2024, when the Prinsens agreed to buy 60 acres on June Lake, inside Cuyuna Country, from Carrie Tretter of Crosby, Minn.

The transaction included Tretter's small interest, which she inherited, in a 40-acre parcel just south of the June Lake land. Those 40 acres are the site of a contentious strip that includes part of the mountain biking trail. The DNR owns a much larger interest, yet by law it shares equal land management rights with Tretter and the Prinsens.

The Prinsens are hoping to build single-story units for rent on June Lake but require a road easement across state land to provide access. They have offered to work with the DNR on the number of cabins and where clusters might go to suit the land.

As part of their plan, the Prinsens and Tretter hoped to "gift" their 1/24 interest in the 40-acre parcel that includes the Galloping Goose and Overburden Road fully to the DNR, Prinsen said. They wanted to relinquish their share in exchange for a road easement.

"If they own it outright, [more] trails can be built there," Prinsen added.

To gather support for their vision, the couple began a series of meetings and presentations.

They met with Cuyuna Country manager Barry Osborne and sought advice for how to engage his DNR colleagues, community leaders and rec area advocates, Prinsen said.

In July 2024, the couple earned a resolution of support from the Ironton City Council.

Avid cyclists with a long family history in the region, the Prinsens continued to present to trail stakeholders and area representatives. The Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area Citizens Advisory Council and a majority of Crow Wing County commissioners came on board. Both groups encouraged DNR Commissioner Sarah Strommen to support the project by providing the easement.

The Prinsens say their vision fits with the DNR's master plan for Cuyuna Country, which was devised with public and private partners to rehabilitate the mining area for

recreation. The state established the recreation area in 1993.

Developing more camping options as the recreation area's use grows is part of the management plan. The couple said their new cabins would tread lightly and cater to a silent sports crowd that the region attracts.

Today, Cuyuna Country draws about 400,000 visitors a year to cycle, fish, paddle and recreate.

The recreation area opened its first 25 miles of mountain biking trails in 2011. Now, the system covers nearly 70 miles. One economic study commissioned by trail advocates seeking bonding money for expansion said building more trails could inject \$20 million annually into the region.



Overlooking June Lake in Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area in Ironton, Minn. (Provided by Tim Prinsen)

The June Lake project has a precedent in the Red Rider resort, the Prinsens said. That private resort on the east side of the recreation area has cabins and sites for recreational

vehicles and tents.

Since first moving to buy the June Lake property in 2024, the Prinsens have continued to negotiate with the DNR, meeting with administrators in St. Paul. In July 2025, they also gathered for a site visit with Minnesota Parks and Trails Director Ann Pierce.

Then, last August, they applied for the June Lake easement.

In December, the DNR denied the easement request. Pierce wrote in a letter to Tim Prinsen that allowing the easement “would cause significant adverse natural resource management impacts.”

Pierce added that allowing the easement would interfere with Cuyuna Country’s “non-commercial atmosphere” and that it crosses an area “of mineral [exploration] potential.”

The Prinsens said they then agreed with the DNR to continue negotiating.

Last month, Prinsen said, the DNR surprised the couple with an offer to swap one of nine state-owned properties in the region for the June Lake property. Seven were tax-forfeited. Much of the land was marshy and nowhere near the recreation area trails, he added.

“They want to take private property, on the cheap,” Prinsen said. “I’m not certain what other conclusion you can come to.”

The couple’s February letter to the DNR requesting that it block public access on the 40-acre parcel was a necessary next step, Prinsen said.

While the DNR has “asserted ownership or control over the parcel” over the years, the Prinsens wrote, their share makes them equal owners. By definition, they added, “the ongoing presence of thousands of visitors on this land raises serious liability and property management concerns.”

Pierce responded to the Prinsens that “the DNR will not be posting such signs as we see them as inconsistent with historic use and DNR’s ownership rights.”

The DNR doesn’t dispute shared ownership of the property but defends its development of the Overburden Road area, citing a right-of-way easement and various land transfer documents.

Prinsen, who has worked in commercial real estate for more than 30 years, is adamant that the couple’s and Tretter’s property rights are clear.

“We followed the process that one goes through to prove title and demonstrate who owns what,” he said.

“If [the DNR] had a document or a smoking gun, they would have given it to us,” Prinsen said. “They would have said, ‘Here, this is irrefutable, go away.’ They have not done that.”

In response to questions from the Minnesota Star Tribune, Pierce defended the DNR’s actions over the shared land, easement request and land-swap offer to the couple.

The Prinsens’ project isn’t consistent with plans for Cuyuna Country or other recreation areas and “well-established legislative direction on how the DNR manages this specific state recreation area (specifically with respect to potential future mining operations),” Pierce wrote in an email.

Regarding the land-swap offer, Pierce said the DNR “did not predetermine what type of lands [the Prinsens] would be interested in and instead presented all options for their consideration.”

Uncertain conclusion

A former representative who championed the creation of Cuyuna Country decades ago and a current state legislator sound bewildered.

Former state Sen. Carrie Ruud, who works as a consultant, said the DNR’s response to the Prinsens is “disheartening.”

“We always envisioned for [the recreation area] to grow, and it has always been a public and private partnership,” she added.

If Minnesotans and other visitors to Cuyuna Country suspect there are barriers to their rides, they may go elsewhere, Ruud said.

“That would be devastating to the economy there,” she added.

At his request, Republican state Rep. Josh Heintzeman met March 9 with Jess Richards, an assistant DNR commissioner, and other agency employees.

Heintzeman, co-chair of the Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee, told them that he is introducing legislation that would require Strommen to grant the easement.

After the meeting, the Nisswa legislator said he was pessimistic about a resolution in the near-term. The DNR again cited the property's mining potential.

The site of a number of abandoned mines, Cuyuna Country's transformation into a recreation hub has become a model for other mountain biking facilities on the Iron Range.

"Let's just see what happens if a mining company comes into Crosby and says, 'We propose to go into the rec area and destroy [the area] used to ride bikes and to use the lakes, and so on,'" Heintzeman said. "I just think it's bonkers."
"I expected DNR to make their best case [in our meeting], and their best case was just weak," he added. "It was not at all something that rose to a level that should prohibit these folks from moving forward with their plan."

Heintzeman, who is married to state Sen. Keri Heintzeman and has ridden the trails with his family, said he hears from Cuyuna Country visitors about the need for more places to stay overnight. He said a June Lake project is a reasonable solution without betraying DNR management.

"I think that DNR should be working with these people and trying to improve access and opportunity within the rec area."

The agency is, Pierce said. "The DNR continues to work to find a resolution to this issue."

The Prinsens are hoping that legislation might move the needle in their relationship with the DNR – and avoid the need for "no trespassing" signs.

"We just feel like we need to fight for what's fair, what's needed and what's wanted," Tim Prinsen said.

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Cheers to Steve Simon

The secretary of state is fighting to stop the ghastly SAVE America Act, currently on the U.S. Senate floor, that would disenfranchise millions of voters. Simon, joined by Sen. Amy Klobuchar in a virtual news conference, explained with his usual calm how the act, which would be effective immediately, would “create chaos” in the November elections. It also would criminalize election workers who make mistakes in assessing the veracity of marriage licenses and birth certificates needed to vote. “That is dangerous overkill,” Simon said. Minnesota’s high voter participation doesn’t happen by accident; we have leaders like Klobuchar and Simon who work to safeguard elections and fight the dangerous suppression push.

Jeers to a bummer for bikers

And to the thought of “no trespassing” signs on the Galloping Goose a 6-mile path for mountain bikers on a popular Iron Range trail network in Crosby. The grim prospect of closure owes to a complicated dispute between Tim and Dawn Prinsen of Minneapolis and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The Prinsens are seeking an easement for rental cabins they are hoping to build; the DNR said no. Absent a resolution, this could drag out for years in court to the detriment of tourists, bikers and landowners. Cheers to state Rep. Josh Heintzeman, R-Merrifield, for trying to push the DNR into a reasonable solution before the spring thaw, but even he’s not optimistic. Surely someone can figure this out so the trail isn’t empty on precious summer afternoons.

Cheers to a glorious season of women’s and girls’ basketball

Last week brought the culmination of a high school season and tournament in which two players, Providence Academy’s Maddyn Greenway and Crosby-Ironton’s Tori Oehrlein, cleared the 5,000-point threshold and battled for the career record. (Greenway owns it.) Now the Golden Gophers return to March Madness on Friday under third-year coach Dawn Plitzuweit. The Gophers haven’t been to the Big Dance since 2018 and last played host to a game at Williams Arena in 2005. If the Gophers, loaded with home state talent, beat Green Bay, they will play again at home Sunday for a chance to advance to the Sweet 16. Curious Minnesotans should get on the bandwagon now as the team seems to be vibing well with Plitzuweit, a success that should continue with Oehrlein joining the Gophers next season. All hail Title IX.