

Birch Creek Conservation Area

Ten Year Area Management Plan FY 2015-2024



Lisa B. Allen
Forestry Division Chief

5-26-15
Date

Birch Creek Conservation Area Management Plan Approval Page

PLANNING TEAM

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OZARK REGION

RCT Chair


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Date

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Date

OVERVIEW

- **Official Area Name:** Birch Creek Conservation Area, # 9513
- **Year of Initial Acquisition:** 1992
- **Acreage:** 5,646 acres
- **County:** Shannon
- **Division with Administrative Responsibility:** Forestry
- **Division with Maintenance Responsibility:** Forestry
- **Statements of Purpose:**

A. Strategic Direction

Maintain and enhance the integrity and water quality of the Birch Creek watershed. Maintain contiguous forest and woodland cover to provide a diversity of habitat for flora and fauna. Collaborate with conservation partners in pursuit of maintaining and enhancing forest interior bird and bear habitat. Support outdoor recreational opportunities for multiple user groups.

B. Desired Future Condition

The desired future condition is a healthy, diverse and contiguous forest/woodland landscape.

C. Federal Aid Statement

The entire property, with the exception of Compartment 6, was acquired with Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds to restore and manage wildlife, conserve and restore wildlife habitat and provide public access for hunting or other wildlife-oriented recreation.

GENERAL INFORMATION AND CONDITIONS

I. Special Considerations

A. Priority Areas: Birch Creek Conservation Area (CA) includes Forestry Division and Wildlife Division priority landscapes. Most of the area encompasses the Eleven Point Hills Conservation Opportunity Area. The Conservation Opportunity Area strategies include:

- 1) Restore shortleaf pine woodlands and glades complexes, and protect and/or enhance other endemic natural communities;
- 2) Restore riparian natural communities, including giant cane stands;
- 3) Conserve hibernacula, maternity colonies and habitat for bats; and
- 4) Control problematic invasive plants and animals.

B. Natural Areas: None

C. Other: Birch Creek CA is within a National Audubon Society and Audubon Missouri Important Bird Area, the Eleven Point Watershed. The bird area was recognized for its extensive contiguous forest cover. This cover provides nesting

habitats for forest interior songbirds, and provides source populations for many forest interior bird species. Conservation issues identified within the bird area include pine woodland restoration through thinning and prescribed burning. This management likely will enhance habitats for several species. Forest connectedness should be maintained amid the woodland management to maintain continuity of habitats for forest-interior nesting birds (Audubon Society, 2011).

II. Important Natural Features and Resources

- A. **Species of Conservation Concern:** Species of conservation concern are known from this area. Area Managers should consult the Natural Heritage Database annually and review all management activities with the Natural History Biologist.
- B. **Caves:** Yes, records kept with the Missouri Department of Conservation (the Department) Natural History Biologist. Managers should follow the Cave Management policy found in the Department Resource Policy Manual. All caves on this and other conservation areas are closed or restricted to public access. The fungus that causes white-nose syndrome in bats has been documented in Missouri, resulting in the Department's *White-nose Syndrome Action Plan* that limits public access to protect bats.
- C. **Springs:** None
- D. **Other:** Over 100 sinkholes have been located on the area. Most are small, but some are as large as 60 acres. Several of the large sinkholes have very steep slopes and are relatively undisturbed. Most of the sinkholes are dry, but several hold moisture for short periods after a rain. The conservation area contains one sinkhole pond.

III. Existing Infrastructure

- 1 mile of Department-maintained gravel road
- 9 wildlife watering holes

IV. Area Restrictions or Limitations

- A. **Deed Restrictions or Ownership Considerations:** None
- B. **Federal Interest:** Uses of land acquired with federal funds may not interfere with the purpose for which it was acquired. Federal funds may also be used in the management of this land. Fish and wildlife agencies may not allow recreational activities and related facilities that would interfere with the purpose for which the State is managing the land. Other uses may be acceptable and must be assessed in each specific situation.
- C. **Easements:** Public road easements are on state Highway 99 and County Road MM-651. Howell-Oregon Electric Co-Op has a power line easement along the

county road and an underground power line along the Department gravel road in Compartment 1.

D. Cultural Resources Findings: Yes, records kept with the Department's Environmental Compliance Specialist. Managers should follow Best Management Practices for Cultural Resources found in the Department's Resource Policy Manual.

E. Hazards and Hazardous Materials: None observed.

F. Endangered Species: None observed.

Boundary Issues: Property lines were re-marked in Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 and are scheduled to be re-marked in FY2017. Establishing accurate and identifiable boundary markers is a priority for this property.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

V. Terrestrial Resource Management Considerations

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) Managing and restoring overstocked forest and woodland areas.
- 2) Improving and restoring woodland habitat to benefit priority plants and animals.
- 3) Controlling and eradicating invasive exotic plants and animals.

Management Objective 1: Identify areas of management challenges and opportunities.

Strategy 1: Inventory compartments according to schedule. (Forestry)

Strategy 2: Implement management recommendations, as outlined in approved forest inventories, including but not limited to commercial timber harvest, timber stand improvement and prescribed burning to encourage woodland ground flora. (Forestry)

Strategy 3: Survey for high priority invasive exotic species (e.g., spotted knapweed, Japanese stiltgrass and feral hogs). Eradicate and/or control invasive exotic species, when possible. (Forestry, Protection, Wildlife)

VI. Aquatic Resource Management Considerations

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) Creating new wildlife watering ponds that are evenly distributed across the area.
- 2) Maintaining appropriate riparian corridors.

Management Objective 1: Increase the number of fishless ponds.

Strategy 1: Build fishless ponds, as needed and in conjunction with forest management practices (i.e., when equipment is on-site). (Forestry)

Management Objective 2: Protect and enhance the riparian corridor along Birch Creek. Protect the area's tributaries, springs, seeps, fens and unique communities associated with bottomland forest from erosion.

Strategy 1: Minimize sedimentation to Birch Creek and its tributaries, following the practices recommended in the *Missouri Watershed Protection* manual (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2014). (Forestry)

Strategy 2: Maintain a riparian corridor with a minimum of 100 feet, from the top of the bank on each side, for first- and second-order streams (i.e., Birch Creek and Spring Creek tributaries), as documented in *Watershed and Stream Management Guidelines* (Missouri Department of Conservation, 2009). (Forestry)

VII. Public Use Management Considerations

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) Identifying trails that need improvement or closure.
- 2) Protecting wildlife habitats and riparian corridors in areas used regularly by the public. There is light, but regular, use of the area by locals throughout the year, with a significant increase of non-local use during the major hunting seasons. Black bears are sensitive and susceptible to high vehicular use, which may preclude or reduce their use of areas with high road density (J. Beringer, personal communication, 2011).
- 3) Enforcing laws and regulations. The area lies in close proximity to the town of Birch Tree. It has a significant number of adjoining landowners that reside on properties adjacent to the area. Activities not in accordance with area regulations or state laws primarily include illegal dumping and prohibited uses after hours.

Management Objective 1: Close or improve trails to protect wildlife habitat and riparian corridors.

Strategy 1: Identify trails (by FY15) that will be closed or improved. Any trails constructed for the purpose of timber harvest will be closed immediately post harvest. Trails left open will continue to be maintained or improved through low-impact, environmentally sensitive methods and will have minimal right of way widths. Where an open trail crosses a riparian corridor, only minimal disturbance to the riparian portion will be allowed. (Protection, Forestry)

Strategy 2: Restrict vehicular access to areas where there will be a low impact on the landscape. Specifically, trails that travel the course or length of any riparian corridor will be closed by FY21.

Strategy 3: Implement road improvements, as identified in Strategy 1 by FY16.

Management Objective 2: Maintain area to invite public use, in accordance with area regulations and state laws.

Strategy 1: Protection and Forestry Division personnel will seek to maintain cooperative relations with neighboring landowners. Cooperative relationships with adjoining landowners have helped curtail unauthorized and illegal activities. (Protection, Forestry)

VIII. Administrative Considerations

Challenges and Opportunities:

- 1) An existing inholding and the outlying Compartment 6 create management challenges and opportunities.
- 2) Land acquisition

Lands Proposed for Acquisition/Disposal:

- When available (and before FY22), inholdings may be considered for acquisition from willing sellers. Tracts that improve area access, provide public use opportunities, contain unique natural communities and/or species of conservation concern, or meet other Department priorities, as identified in the annual Department land acquisition priorities, may be considered. (Forestry)
- In order to facilitate area management, Compartment 6 may be considered for disposal, if the opportunity arises by FY22. (Forestry)

APPENDICES

Area Background:

Like most of the Ozarks, the area experienced an era of exploitative timber harvests during the early 20th century. The property was purchased by Kerr-McGee Chemical Corp. in the 1930s. It was managed by Kerr-McGee with selective harvests and some pine plantings until it was sold to The Nature Conservancy in 1992 as part of a larger land sale. The Nature Conservancy sold the property to the Department in 1992. Since then, management activities have included oak regeneration harvests (on approximately 120 acres), wildfire/windstorm salvage sales (from 330 acres), and a controlled burn for woodland restoration (on 400 acres). Another 330 acres of selectively thinned mostly uneven-aged timber, will be harvested in the next two years.

At present, most of the area consists of over stocked stands of oak, pine and oak-pine sawtimber. Almost all the acreage is classified as woodland, but there is very little woodland structure due to high tree stocking and the absence of fire.

Current Land and Water Types:

| Land/Water Type | Acres | % of Area |
|--------------------------|--------------|------------|
| Upland Forest/Woodland | 5,160 | 91 |
| Riparian Forest/Woodland | 481 | 9 |
| Old Fields/Upland Fields | 5 | <1 |
| Total | 5,646 | 100 |

Public Input Summary:

The draft Birch Creek Conservation Area Management Plan was available for a public comment period January 1–31, 2015. The Missouri Department of Conservation received comments from two respondents (Appendix A). The Birch Creek Conservation Area Planning Team carefully reviewed and considered these ideas as they finalized this document. A brief summary of public input themes, including how they were incorporated or why they were not, can be found below. Rather than respond to each individual comment, comments are grouped into general themes and are addressed collectively.

Department responses to themes and issues identified through Birch Creek Conservation Area public comment period

Suggests keeping roads and trails permanently open.

There are no plans to close any roads on Birch Creek CA maintained by the Department, with plans to improve access on several roads. The Area Plan has goals of restricting access of motorized vehicles on unauthorized “trails” to riparian areas and sinkholes, as well as roads that were established as access for a timber sale.

After considering the suggestion, the planning team recommends maintaining these goals and objectives as written in the plan to protect the watershed and wildlife habitat.

Suggests adding a multi-use trail system (for hiking, biking and equestrian use) and parking lots.

The area planning team considered the suggestion of developing a multi-use trail that would allow equestrian use. There are currently 9.5 miles of multi-use trails on Angeline Conservation Area plus 23.5 miles on the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. In addition to these trails in Shannon County, the US Forest Service maintains three horse trails nearby in Oregon County.

The establishment of a multi-use trail would increase area maintenance and enforcement requirements such as erosion control, litter patrols, unauthorized trail use and the potential spread and/or introduction of invasive plant species. Given that there are currently many other public multi-use trails allowing equestrian use in the vicinity, the planning team does not recommend developing an equestrian trail on Birch Creek CA.

References:

Audubon Society. (2011). *Site report: Eleven Point Watershed-43*.

<http://iba.audubon.org/iba/profileReport.do?siteId=2594>. Accessed December 7, 2011.

Missouri Department of Conservation. (1998). *Birch Creek Conservation Area plan*.

Missouri Department of Conservation. (2009). *Watershed and stream management guidelines for lands and waters managed by Missouri Department of Conservation*. Jefferson City, Missouri: Missouri Department of Conservation.

Missouri Department of Conservation. (2011). Decision support tool.

Missouri Department of Conservation. (2011). Heritage database.

Missouri Department of Conservation. (2014). *Missouri watershed protection practice recommended practices for Missouri forests: 2014 management guidelines for maintaining forested watersheds to protect streams*. Jefferson City, Missouri: The Conservation Commission of the State of Missouri.

Maps:

Figure 1: Area Map

Figure 2: Aerial Map

Figure 3: Topographic Map

Additional Appendices:

Appendix A: Draft Birch Creek Conservation Area Management Plan Public Comments

Figure 1: Area Map

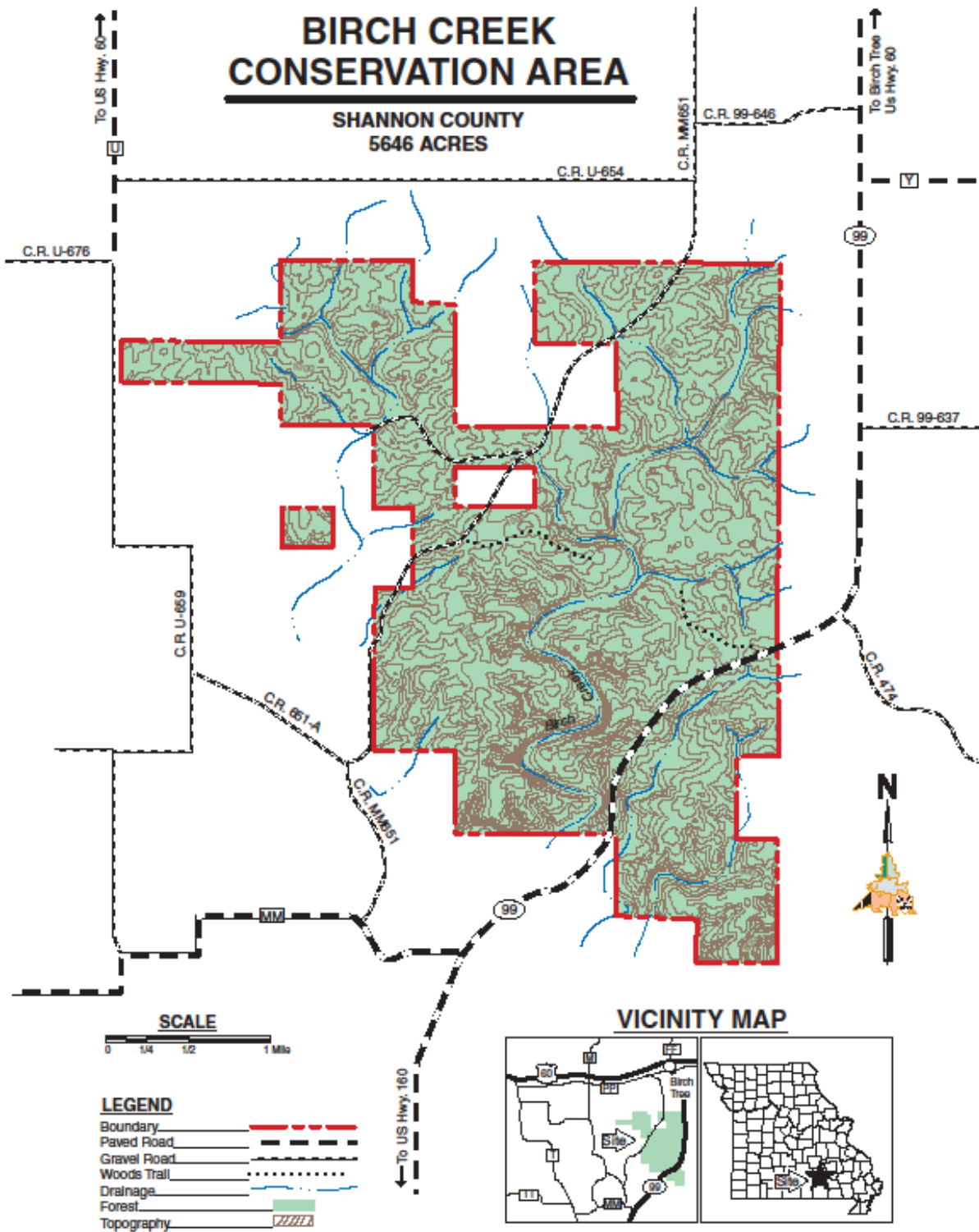


Figure 2: Aerial Map

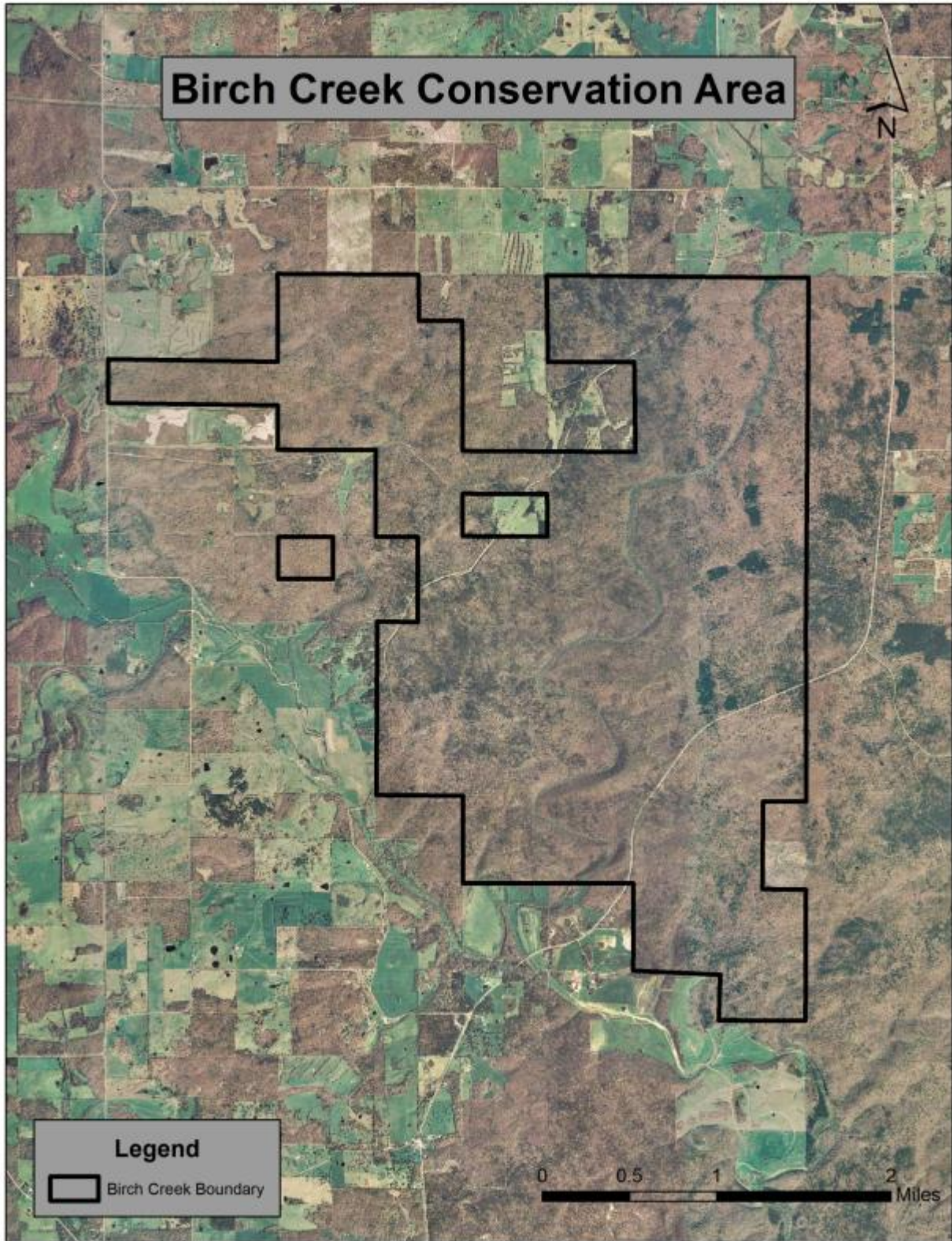
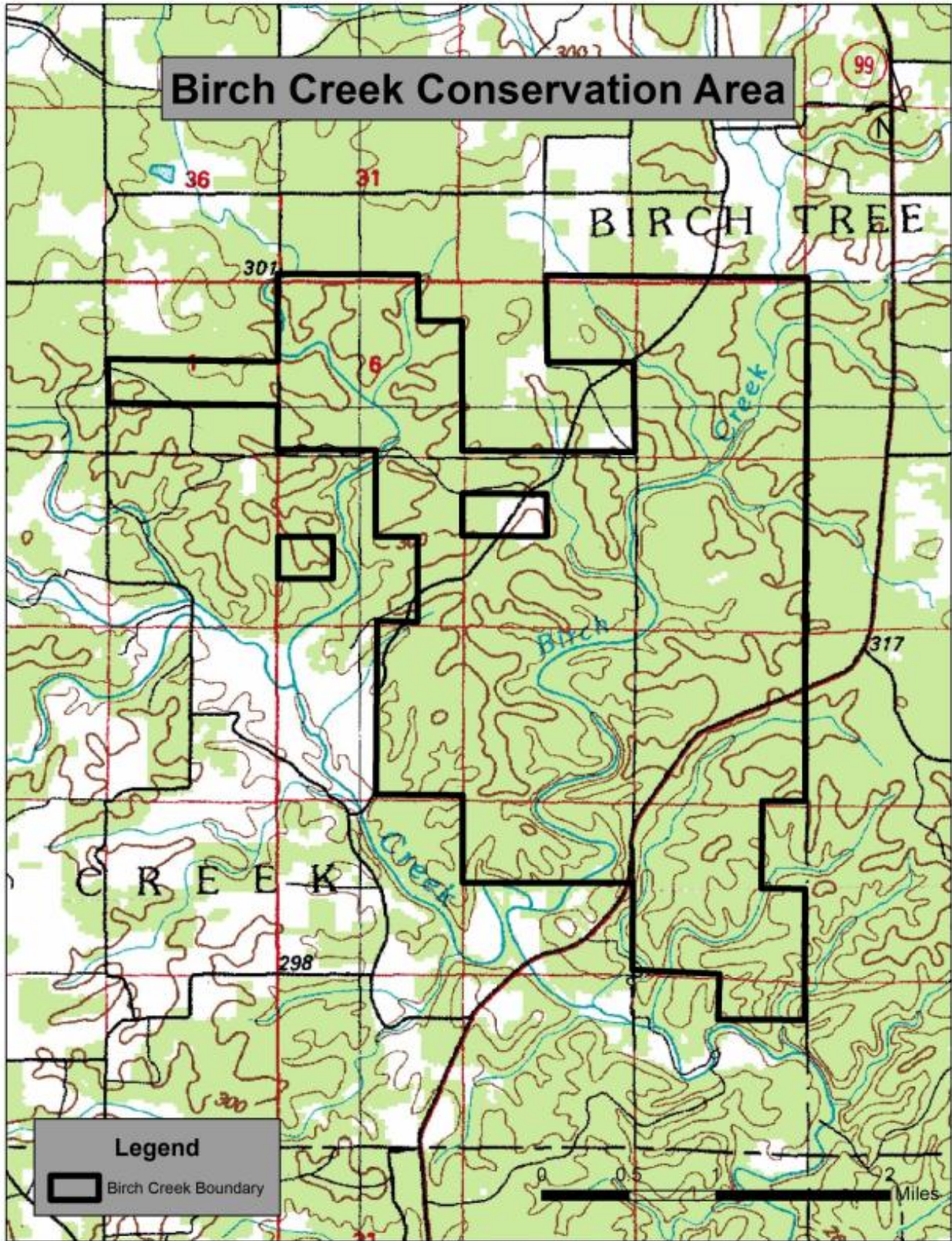


Figure 3: Topographic Map



Appendix A. Draft Birch Creek Conservation Area Management Plan Public Comments

Received during public comment period (January 1-31, 2015)

I would like express my concern towards any proposed road/trail closures in the birch tree area
These provide access for multiple users and all should remain open permanently

First, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Area Management Plan for Birch Creek CA. Shannon County is blessed with many equestrian trail opportunities on State and Federal public lands; the county is not underserved in this regard. Birch Cree CA's location in the southwest corner of Shannon Co. is near Howell and Texas Counties which are underserved--do not offer public land riding opportunities consistent with the equine population. Birch Creek CA is nearly perfectly suited to the development of an extensive multi-use trail system. Proximity to U.S. Hwy 60 and being intersected by MO Hwy 99 and a county road provide good public access to the area. The area does not have a public shooting range; particularly sensitive natural areas are not inventoried. The CA is within an Audubon Missouri Important Bird Area; a multi-use trail network would increase opportunities for bird watchers. The size (5,646 acres), soils, topography, geographical location, public road access, and current uses of the area are all conducive to the development of a nice multi-use trail system. Parking lots are, of course, needed.

Show Me Missouri Back Country Horsemen recommends developing a multi-use trail network on Birch Creek CA to benefit hikers, bikers, and equestrians. SMMBCH offers our services (availability of volunteers permitting) to help decide on the best location and then clear and mark the trails.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.