

Cook forest preserves' condition called poor

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Two-thirds of the Cook County Forest Preserve District's natural land is in poor condition because officials have largely abandoned land management practices while allowing invasive plant species to grow, a study released Tuesday said.

The study, which was released by Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks, called for more people to handle land management while still making acquisition of new property a priority before land prices become prohibitive.

The district's 54,000 acres of natural land, nearly half of which is forest, is being overrun by invasive species such as wild black cherry trees and common buckthorn, the study says.

"The district is not managing its land," said Debra Shore of Friends of the Forest Preserves. "It's in poor shape and that will continue unless they start to take care of it."

The rating of "poor" for 68 percent of the natural land, which does not include the district's developed acreage such as golf courses and swimming pools, was based upon a "land audit" conducted last summer. The Friends of the Forest Preserves, the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society conducted the audit, which was the first of its kind for the forest preserves, the study says.

A spokesman for the Forest Preserve District questioned the scientific value of the audit and said claims that the district has let land management slip are "absolutely untruthful."

The Forest Preserve District has 10,000 acres at 70 sites under active land management, spokesman Steve Mayberry said.

"The bottom line is our lands are in good condition," Mayberry said. "Our staff are out in the field year-round making sure our lands are in good shape."

But the study found that in the district's 25,000 acres of forests, the large old oak trees and cottonwoods are being replaced by invasive species such as wild black cherry, sugar maple and box elder.

The most common plants, such as buckthorn and tall goldenrod, are "sources or indicators of ecological distress," the report says, adding there are also unhealthy, high percentages of bare ground.

Though the financial situation is a campaign issue for many candidates in the March 19 primary, the timing of the study's release was not politically motivated, said Erma Tranter, executive director of Friends of the Parks.

County Commissioner Peter Silvestri, who does not face an opponent in the primary, said he welcomed the report.

"The basic problem with the forest preserve is that it's just not healthy," Silvestri said. "It's not healthy with the finances and it's not healthy in terms of the land holdings."