

ITASCA COUNTY PRIORITIZES LAKES, RIVERS IN EFFORT TO PROTECT WILD RICE LAKE ECOLOGY

By Alicia Bauman For the Herald-Review 1 hr ago

Protecting wild rice shorelands, habitats

Trying to protect and preserve the wild rice habitat for wetland-dependent wildlife and breeding waterfowl, is a top priority for the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC).

And with 158 lakes and seven rivers and streams known to have wild rice currently or historically growing right here in Itasca County, it poses an even greater local need.

"Wild rice harvesting season occurs annually between Aug. 15 and Sept. 30. These harvesting seasons are becoming more challenging due to well-documented population and development trends that damage wild rice habitat," Chris Beeth, public relations/content strategist with Certified B Corporation, out of Minneapolis stated. "This is significant as wild rice is some of the most important habitat for wetland-dependent wildlife species in Minnesota, habitat especially important to the state's migrating and breeding waterfowl."

"The 158 lakes total about 76,000 lake acres," Ann Geisen said, a wildlife specialist with the Shallow Lakes Program associated with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

However, she added wild rice acreage is difficult to determine, since it fluctuates every year and can be significantly impacted by storm events and high water.

In addition, Dan Steward, Itasca County Watershed/Private Forest Management Program Coordinator said, "It ebbs and flows both in extent and quality depending on the year. Years with high water levels are very hard on wild rice. High water levels tend to be driven either by precipitation, or beaver activity on the outlet of a given wild rice lake."

To address these threats, LSOHC recommended a project to the Minnesota Legislature.

DNR Wildlife staff and Itasca County Soil and Water Conservation District staff met to prioritize the wild rice waters for this project back in 2014.

"The Wild Rice Shoreland Protection program uses funds allocated by the Outdoor Heritage Fund to acquire wild rice shoreland habitat through conservation easements and fee-title acquisitions, protecting wild rice lake shorelands and preventing shoreline development that could degrade wild rice lake ecology," said Beeth.

These efforts benefit Itasca County and several other counties throughout the state.

"The Wild Rice Shoreland Protection – Phase 6 project calls for the Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources (BWSR) to use \$1,197,000 in appropriated funds to protect approximately 3.8 miles of wild rice shoreland habitat through the use of permanent conservation easements (580 acres) and fee-title acquisition (50 acres)," Beeth explained.

The BWSR will utilize the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Easement process in partnership with 14 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDS) to conduct project efforts.

Itasca is one of the designated counties conservation efforts will be directed toward.

The Wild Rice Shoreland Protection program has spent more than \$6 million dollars to protect more than 4,800 acres to date.

"The SWCD office generally contacts landowners on high priority rice lakes or streams. Some lakes are rice lakes, but only have a thin fringe of rice, these lakes are generally not high priority for the purposes of conservation easements," Steward said. "Ann [Geisen] meets with each SWCD to review each wild rice lake and together they set lake priorities. Lakes with more rice acreage, private shoreland and frequent waterfowl use tend to rank higher."

According to a document from the Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment, the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council makes annual funding recommendations to the Minnesota Legislature from the Outdoor Heritage Fund for projects that restore, protect and enhance wetlands, prairies, forests and habitat for fish, game and wildlife.

The Outdoor Heritage Fund was created in 2008 when Minnesota's voters overwhelmingly approve the Legacy Amendment, which dedicated a small portion of sales tax revenue toward Clean Water, Habitat Restoration, Arts and Parks and Trails. The Outdoor Heritage Fund receives one-third of the money created by the sales tax increase.

The council is non-partisan and evaluates requests from a wide variety of conservation groups.

The 12-member body consists of eight citizens and four legislators.

The Outdoor Heritage Fund was created to fulfill the wishes of Minnesota voters through a well-planned, open process with numerous checks and balances to assure that the funds are spent effectively. Through this process, Minnesotans have made a long-term investment to restore and protect the wildlife habitat that has been critical to the State leaving a legacy for the next generation.