

Healthy Waters Series: #7

Healthy Waters for the Future: It's Up to You.

Where in the scheme of things do you fit in? Are you more comfortable doing things at home, in your neighborhood, at the community level or are you one that likes to get involved in the Big Picture? Everyone fits into one of those categories and that is where you should start and take that first step to get involved in your watershed.

This is the last article of the Healthy Waters Series written for the Leech Lake Watershed Restoration and Protection Project (WRAP) sponsored by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and its partners. There have been articles on Water Quality, Links between Healthy Forests and Lake Quality, the Effects of Water Quality on Fish, Wildlife and Plants, the Connections Between Surface Water and Ground Water, Climate Change Effects on Healthy Waters and What are Sustainable Communities. All are subjects that contribute and are interconnected to watersheds and in this case we are talking about the Leech Lake watershed.

Daniel J. Rice in a recent article entitled "The Source of Opportunity" states, "We naturally take care of what we appreciate and appreciation is strengthened by understanding."

The MPCA has taken on the task of assessing the major watersheds of Minnesota on a 10 year rotational basis. The steps of this new Watershed Approach are as follows:

Step 1: Monitor and gather data and information: This integrates past data with comprehensive intensive assessments of waters within each major watershed. The Leech Lake Watershed WRAP is completing this process this summer.

Step 2: Assess the data: Waters not meeting water quality standards are listed as impaired waters. This is work that will be done this fall and next year in the Leech Lake watershed.

Step 3: Establish implementation strategies to meet standards: Based on the assessments a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) study is completed and an overall water quality framework which details strategies and methods for meeting water quality standards is developed.

Step 4: Implement water quality activities: includes traditional permitting activities, in addition to programs and actions directed at nonpoint sources.

The goal is to complete Steps 1-3 within four years of initiation in each watershed and Step 4 would start in the fifth year.

This is year two of the 10 year process on the Leech Lake WRAP. At this time data is still being collected from 18 lake and river sites within the watershed. The preliminary results of the pre-assessed data are that the overall condition of the Leech Lake watershed appears to be good. Forty three (43) different species of fish were sampled, with the most diverse fish communities existing in the Leech Lake River and Boy River. Due to some early heavy rain events resulting in high water levels and large runoff discharges from wetlands into streams and rivers some sites were unable to be sampled. Any questionable samples from these events will be resampled later in 2013. Formal assessments of the collected data will occur during the early spring of 2014. At that time, possible impairments or degradation within the watershed may be discovered. The MPCA report for the Leech Lake WRAP should be completed by the spring of 2015.

This study is no small task as this watershed covers approximately 854,659 acres in the Northern lakes and Forest eco-region and includes parts of Beltrami, Cass and Hubbard counties. From the previous articles the main threats to this watershed are increased pressure from development and subsequent loss of shoreline and aquatic habitat, demands for more safe and clean drinking water, and the reduction of forested lands for development reducing ground cover which

directly affects the plant and animal communities. The area this watershed comprises is a diverse and complex system that will only be maintained if we work to protect and maintain the quality of the watershed and its waters into the future.

Now it is up to you. How does the average citizen become involved in a big 10 year MPCA study? The work begins at home. It is everyone's responsibility to try to do the best things for the land or in agricultural language use Best Management Practices (BMP's). Be aware of what you apply to your lawns- don't use phosphate fertilizers. Create buffer areas along shorelines of lakes, rivers and streams. Leave as much cover on the land as possible to help hold the soil and reduce erosion. Install gutter systems on your homes and run the water from your roof into rain barrels to be used for watering your gardens when needed or create rain gardens to allow the water that runs off your roof to have time to infiltrate or soak into the soil instead of running off. Dispose of household hazardous wastes correctly, not by dumping them in the woods out back. On a neighborhood or community level watch for workshops and classes on septic system care, lawn care and best management practices for your home. Check with your local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Extension Service, 4-H, and community organizations for projects and trainings they may offer. This WRAP is centered around Civic Engagement which means you, the public, being involved every step of the way. For those of you that like the Big Picture work watch the newspapers and listen to the radio for Leech Lake WRAP Civic Engagement sessions, updates and input meetings to be announced. The data collection is just finishing and now the work begins on where the problem areas may be and what we can do about it. Grab a friend or two and come to the meetings and find out yourself what is happening. You are encouraged to get involved. This is your Watershed, please take the time to get to know it, appreciate it and keep it healthy now and for years and generations to come.

Contacts for getting more information are:

MPCA webpage: <http://www.pca.state.mn.us> , click on **water** go to **surface water** or click on **watersheds**

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