

Legislation Offers Star Lake Status as Reward for Good Stewardship

The COLA Call

by Ed Mutsch

Freshman state senator Mary Olson (DFL, district 04) is passionate about Minnesota lakes, rivers, and wetlands, and the imperative to protect them. Because of the high concentration of lakes in her legislative district, immediately upon her 2006 election she was inundated with constituent concerns relating to a range of issues, including aquatic invasive species, declining fish populations, lake nutrient overloads, overall water quality, dock proliferation, and development densities. Her constituents were largely “preaching to the choir”, as Senator Olson lives on a lake in the Bemidji area and thus was primed to respond to their concerns. The resulting conflation of political and personal interest impelled her to spearhead a drive to create legislation that would confer Star Lake status on lakes that were committed to a set of best management practices.

Senator Olson’s intensive efforts culminated in the 2008 passage of Minnesota Star Lake legislation. Under this legislation a lake association may apply to a Star Lake Board for designation as a Star Lake. The application must include a lake management plan which in turn must contain a commitment to a water quality monitoring program and specify the means for managing littoral and shoreline native vegetation, eliminating aquatic invasive species, and maintaining a healthy fishery. Retention of a Star Lake designation requires an updating of the lake management plan every 5 years.

The Star Lake Board charged with the responsibility of vetting the applications for Star Lake designation will be made up of 15 members. Three, one representing county government, one representing city government, and one representing a clean lakes and rivers organization, will be appointed by the

Speaker of the house; another three representing the same affiliations will be appointed by a senate subcommittee; one will be appointed by the state DNR commissioner; one by the PCA commissioner, one by the state Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR); and one by the Indian Affairs Council. The aforementioned group of 10 appointed board members will in turn appoint the other five members. These positions are open to any individuals who are members of a lake or river association or a related advocacy group. Applications for one of these board positions may be obtained by calling the BWSR at 651-297-5617 or at the BWSR website at www.bwsr.state.mn.us/Star_Lakes. The full text of the embodying legislation may also be found at this site. Applications for board membership are due by September 10, 2008. Appointments are expected to be made at the first meeting of the Star Lakes board in early October.

Regular readers of this column (if there is such a thing) will clearly recognize our strong support for any organization, program, legislation, or individual effort directed at the protection or improvement of the precious north central Minnesota water resources so critically important as the economic underpinning of our region. Given that record, it should come as no surprise that we applaud Senator Olson's efforts in successfully championing the Star Lakes legislation. At the same time, one should have few illusions about the legislation's limitations.

The Star Lakes legislation will most certainly attract applications from those lake associations already at the forefront of lake management planning and accelerate the efforts of those associations which are well into the implementation of such plans. However, the "carrot" of Star Lake status is unlikely to stimulate the formation of new lake associations or prompt inactive lake associations to become active, for the simple reason that there are no real incentives to do so. The legislation does not come with funds which could be used as grants to enable lake associations to achieve certain of the objectives of their lake management plans. While the Star Lakes Board is charged with the responsibility to "work with private and public entities to leverage the resources available to achieve and sustain the designation of Minnesota star lakes and rivers in Minnesota" and, elsewhere in the legislation, "the board may assist lake associations with finding appropriate technical and financial assistance", and yet again, "to the extent that money is available, the board may secure, provide, or recommend financial assistance to meet specific needs of lake associations", such language is pretty "wishy washy" and should probably not be relied upon a priori as a firm funding source.

Much as the intensive Hubbard County COLA effort on the aquatic invasive species threat with its "Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers" road signs and billboards has significantly impacted citizen awareness of the problem, the Star Lakes legislation represents an additional means of increasing public awareness of the importance of protecting our vital water resources. As such, it is a highly welcome addition; our lakes can use all the help they can get.

This article appeared in the August 30, 2008 edition of the Park RapidsEnterprise.

