

Leech Lake Watershed Designated One of Nationally Recognized 10 'Waters to Watch'

The National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) has designated the Leech Lake watershed as one of the nationally recognized 10 "Waters to Watch" for 2013, according to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

"The Leech Lake watershed is a large watershed of 855,000 acres that includes Leech Lake and 272 other lakes over 10 acres," said Katie Haws, the DNR's Midwest Glacial Lakes Partnership (MGLP) coordinator. "The lakes and rivers in this watershed are some of the most beautiful in the country. This is why the Leech Lake watershed was selected as one of the 10 "Waters to Watch."

The DNR partners with other natural resource agencies and non-governmental agencies, with common goals of improving fish habitats in lakes of seven Midwest states. This partnership, called Midwest Glacial Lakes Partnership, is one of 18 fish habitat partnerships recognized and supported by the National Fish Habitat Partnership.

The MGLP nominated the Leech Lake watershed to the list, a collection of water bodies and watershed systems that will likely benefit from conservation efforts to protect, restore or enhance their current condition.

The 2013 list represents a snapshot of voluntary habitat conservation efforts in progress. These and other locally driven conservation projects are funded by the NFHP and implemented by regional fish habitat partnerships throughout the country. The lakes and streams in the Leech Lake watershed



Child Lake Easement

A conservation easement on 3 acres and 350 feet of shoreline on Child Lake of the Woman Lake Chain was donated by Randy and Kathy Ferrin to permanently protect critical fish and wildlife habitat. LLAWF facilitated the project for the Midwest Glacial Lakes Partnership grant and the easement is held by Cass County.

contain healthy populations of walleye, northern pike, muskie, bluegill and many other game and nongame species, yet there are challenges to the health and water quality in the region, Hawes noted. Challenges include projected population growth around area lakes, invasive species issues and declining water quality in some lakes.

Two projects funded by the NFHP and the MGLP are addressing some of the Leech Lake watershed challenges.

The first project, "Protecting Sensitive Shorelands in Cass County" was funded in 2010 as a \$20,000 pilot project. The project will acquire two perpetual conservation easements on private land in the Leech Lake watershed on shorelands identified as sensitive habitats by Cass County and the Leech Lake Area Watershed Foundation; the easements are held by Cass County.

Cass County Environmental Services working in collaboration with the Leech Lake Area Watershed Foundation also received \$300,000 from the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) to fund conservation easements on an additional 3-5 miles of sensitive shorelands on 19 lakes in Cass County. To date, seven parcels (more than 1 mile of shoreland) have been put under permanent protection with conservation easements, the majority of which were located in the Leech Lake watershed. The land remains in private ownership and on the tax rolls, yet is protected from adverse habitat actions such as land clearing and development.

"Because of these partnerships and the additional funding made available, the Leech Lake Area Watershed Foundation (LLAWF) has been able to pursue innovative approaches to conservation strategies," said Paula West, the foundation's exec-



Portage Creek Dam being removed to open up fish passage between Portage and Leech Lake.

utive director. "More than 10 miles of sensitive shorelands will be protected by 2014 through these projects and additional funding from the Outdoor Heritage Fund, part of the 2008 constitutionally dedicated Legacy funds."

The second project, funded by the MGLP and the NFHP in 2012, is a cooperative effort with the Chippewa National Forest and Leech Lake Band to improve the natural hydrology and connectivity in Portage Creek/Portage Lake in the Leech Lake watershed. A dam/culvert removal/replacement project on this waterway will reconnect 3 miles of stream channel and 107,000 acres of lakes (Portage Lake will now be connected with Leech Lake).

The project is scheduled to be completed this fall, benefiting walleye, northern pike, largemouth bass and yellow perch and enhancing recreational and tribal subsistence opportunities. The project cost is projected to be \$127,500, with \$10,000 funded by the NFHP.

For more information on the Fish Habitat Partnership, visit www.fishhabitat.org. For more information on the Midwest Glacial Lakes Partnership, visit www.MidwestGlacialLakes.org.