

## Section 4

### Resource Initiative B: Fisheries and Aquatic Vegetation

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#### A. Key Issues

- **Aquatic Vegetation.** There is a lack of emergent vegetation in the Sauk River Chain of Lakes. Bulrush and cattails provide quality fish habitat and water quality fish benefits. Protecting existing habitat is important.
- **Knowledge of the Resource Base.** Recent surveys of fisheries and aquatic vegetation provide solid information for resource management and decision-making. Historic information regarding aquatic vegetation may be available but has not yet been organized.
- **Demand for Water Surface Use.** There is an increasing demand on the Sauk River Chain of Lakes for water surface use activities such as boating, fishing, water skiing, jet skis, leisure, aesthetics, etc. The Chain of Lakes is a popular recreation destination.
- **Algae Blooms.** Algae blooms can deplete oxygen for fisheries and other biological life in the lakes. Water quality issues are interrelated with fisheries and aquatic vegetation.

#### B. Key Findings

- **Good Fisheries/Active Management.** The lakes in the SRCL Sublakeshed are productive fisheries. There is a good walleye stocking program in place.
- **Water Quality.** Lake water quality has improved significantly since 1985.
- **Large Tracts of Undeveloped Shoreline.** There are several large undeveloped tracts around the lakes. Undeveloped shoreline areas tend to have better aquatic vegetation conditions, which are critical to healthy fish populations.

#### C. Primary Roles of the SRCL

- **Promote Protection.** Support efforts by the MN DNR Divisions of Fisheries and Enforcement, the County Sheriff's Office and other appropriate agencies and organizations to protect and improve fish and wildlife populations and habitat.
- **Support Management.** Support efforts to protect and manage the native aquatic vegetation in the lakes and prevent the spread of invasive species.
- **Encourage Safe Recreation.** Promote the safe and wise recreational use of surface waters by working with users of the lakes and the appropriate local and state law enforcement officials.

## D. Goals, Objectives and Action Items

**Goal 1 – Encourage Habitat Protection.** Protect and enhance fish and wildlife habitat in the Sauk River Chain of Lakes.

**Rationale:**

- There is a limited amount of emergent and submersed vegetation on the Chain of Lakes. Aquatic vegetation including bulrush and cattails provide critical habitat for many species of fish as well as wildlife.
- In 2003, the MN DNR issued a total of four (4) permits to control aquatic vegetation for the Chain of Lakes. This is very low in comparison to other lakes in the region.
- Most of the emergent vegetation is located on the southern side of the non-flowage lakes and in the bay areas. The existing emergent vegetation also tends to be located along undeveloped shoreline areas.
- With the growing use of the lakes for recreational activities, the prevention of invasive species such as Eurasian milfoil or curly leaf pondweed and reducing algae blooms need to be thoroughly addressed. More development along the shorelines place increased pressures on fish and wildlife.

**Potential Monitoring Indicators:**

- Completion of the aquatic vegetation inventories and plan.
- completion of 3 to 5 shoreline restoration projects per year.

**Objective A: SRCL Training.** Increase the understanding and awareness by SRCL leaders and members on fish and wildlife habitat management topics.

**Actions:**

1. Presentations. Invite speakers that are knowledgeable about fish and wildlife habitat to SRCL Board and committee meetings, annual lake association meetings, and other SRCL functions. Some of the topics to be addressed include but are not limited to: specific habitat needs for sport fish and other native species; loon nesting; and the impacts of algae blooms.
2. Document Collection. Periodically gather and organize documents on fish and wildlife habitat management. Assign one person to maintain the collection of documents and assist in the distribution of information.
3. Habitat Protection Information. Support the distribution of information on ways landowners and lake users can protect fish and wildlife habitat in the Chain of Lakes and throughout the SRCL Lakeshed. Use the website, newsletter, newspaper articles, and other mediums to distribute the information.

**Objective B: Develop Aquatic Vegetation Inventory and Plan.** Prepare inventories of historic and present aquatic vegetation areas in all lakes in the SRCL Sublakeshed. Work with the MN DNR and other appropriate agencies to develop an aquatic vegetation management plan.

**Actions:**

1. Historic Aquatic Vegetation Map. Investigate historical vegetation records consisting of aerial photos at the Stearns SWCD. Develop a GIS based map.
2. Current Vegetation Map. Refine vegetation maps prepared in 2003.
3. Future Inventories. Support efforts to survey and map aquatic vegetation every 10 years.
4. AVM Plan. Work with the MN DNR to develop an Aquatic Vegetation Management (AVM) Plan. Identify critical aquatic habitat areas and important undeveloped tracts of land in the AVM Plan. Address algae blooms in the AVM Plan and coordinate fisheries/aquatic vegetation management efforts with objectives and actions listed in Section 3 – In-Lake Water Quality.

**Objective C: Protect Undeveloped Tracts.** Support the protection and preservation of large undeveloped tracts located in critical habitat areas.

**Actions:**

1. Identify, Inventory and Prioritize Sites. Identify and inventory larger tracts of undeveloped land in the SRCL Sublakeshed on a minor watershed basis. Prioritize the list of tracts for importance to the SRCL for conservation and habitat protection purposes.
2. Landowner Awareness. Provide information on land conservation and habitat protection programs to owners of large undeveloped tracts in shoreland areas.
3. AMA Program/Other Land Conservation Programs. Support the purchase of land or easements of undeveloped tracts through the Aquatic Management Areas (AMA) program administered by the MN DNR and/or other land conservation programs (BWSR, Minnesota Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy, etc.).
4. Restrictive Covenants. Encourage local governmental units to place restrictive covenants that protect shoreline vegetation on newly developed parcels.

**Objective D: Support Restoration Projects.** Support efforts to protect and restore shoreline and aquatic habitat.

**Actions:**

1. Identify, Inventory and Prioritize Areas for Restoration. Identify and inventory areas where existing shoreline and aquatic habitats should be protected. Prioritize these areas in the SRCL Sublakeshed on a minor watershed basis.
2. Education. Provide information to property owners regarding the MN DNR rules for aquatic and shoreline vegetation management, including woody debris. Encourage landowners and lake users to leave woody debris in the lakes. Provide information to property owners regarding ways to restore shoreline vegetation and encourage that all properties are critical.

3. Shoreline Restoration Projects. Encourage the installation of 3 to 5 shoreline restoration projects annually.
4. Financial Assistance. The SRCL may provide financial support for shoreline restoration projects.
5. Kinzer Creek. Support efforts to restore Kinzer Creek, a designated trout stream tributary to Knaus Lake.
6. High Priority Streams. Support water quality projects (stream bank restorations, buffer strips, etc.) to high priority tributary streams.
7. Aeration Project. Continue to provide aeration to prevent winterkill on Becker Lake.

**Objective E: Water Surface Use Management.** Develop and implement a water surface use management plan for all lakes in the SRCL Sublakeshed.

**Actions:**

1. Water Surface Use Management Plan. Work with the appropriate local units of government, Stearns County Sheriff's Department and the MN DNR to develop a water surface use management (WSUM) plan for all of the lakes in the SRCL Sublakeshed in accordance with Minnesota Statutes 378.32 and 459.20.
2. Education Program. Implement educational events and activities as outlined in the WSUM Plan.
3. Public Access Signage. Work with the MN DNR to install and/or maintain signage at all public accesses that describe and inform boaters on boating safety, fishing, and other recreational aspects of using the lakes. Provide information on the proper cleaning/maintenance practices to prevent the spread of non-native species.
4. Regulatory Provisions. Develop draft water surface use regulations for the lakes as guided by the WSUM Plan. Work with the appropriate governing units to adopt and enforce the regulations.
5. Invasive Species Prevention. Prevent the spread of non-native plants and animals by inspecting public accesses and providing information to all lake users.

**Goal 2 – Promote Active Fisheries Management.** Promote the growth of fish to larger sizes for sport fishing through active fisheries management.

**Rationale:**

- The Sauk River Chain of Lakes is a complex ecosystem. Managing the fisheries resource in the lakes is a complex challenge.
- The fish community appears to be in good balance. Sport fish grow fast in the Chain of Lakes and provide an overall quality angling experience.
- The SRCL and the MN DNR has established good working relationships through previous fisheries resource planning efforts and a variety of management activities. There are many ways that the SRCL can help the MN DNR in managing the fisheries including gathering data and assisting on surveys.

**Potential Monitoring Indicators:**

- Walleye survey counts of 5-6 adult fish per net sustained for the long term.
- Creel survey estimates show that angling harvest is equal to or greater than the goal of 15 pounds per acre.
- Largemouth and smallmouth bass are captured at a rate of 55 fish per hour of electrofishing, a rate similar to other area lakes with good bass populations.

**Objective A – Fish Management Planning.** Assist the MN DNR Division of Fisheries in developing and/or updating the Fisheries Lake Management Plans for all lakes in the SRCL Sublakeshed.

**Actions:**

1. Liaison. Appoint a SRCL Board member or Fisheries/Aquatic Vegetation Subcommittee member to be the liaison to the MN DR Fisheries.
2. MN DNR Fisheries Presentation. Continue to invite the MN DNR Area Fisheries Manager to at least one SRCL Board meeting per year to review plans and activities.
3. Lake Surveys. Assist the MN DNR in conducting fisheries lake surveys at 10-year intervals. The next survey is scheduled for 2013. Consider funding additional lake surveys as appropriate.
4. Creel Survey. Assist the MN DNR in conducting periodic creel surveys to estimate angler harvest and assess attitudes. The next survey is scheduled for 2013. Consider funding additional creel surveys as appropriate.
5. Fish Management Plans. Gather and provide local input to the MN DNR on fish management topics such as desired fish populations, stocking rates, and management practices, including size limits and other fishing regulations. Support revising the fisheries lake management plans as changes occur. Review and provide comments to the MN DNR on draft fish lake management plans for lakes in the SRCL Sublakeshed.

**Objective B: Fish Management Activities.** Provide and manage fish populations for angling.

**Actions:**

1. Walleye Stocking. The MN DNR and the SRCL will stock walleye fry every other year since walleye generally do not reproduce in the lakes.
2. Stocking Evaluation. Assist MN DNR to evaluate walleye stocking success with electrofishing during years of stocking.
3. Channel Catfish. Support efforts by the MN DNR to remove surplus channel catfish.
4. Future projects. Future projects may include sport fish population estimations and specific spawning site identification.

**Objective C: Special Fishing Regulations.** Consider improving fish size structure for quality angling voluntarily or by implementing special fishing regulations.

**Actions:**

1. Catch-and-Release. Encourage anglers to voluntarily release a portion of their catch.
2. Angler Input. Determine angler interest/acceptance of possible restrictive regulations by size and species.
3. Toolbox. Provide information to all anglers based on DNR regulation "Toolbox Options".

**Objective D: Coordination.** Assist fishing and sportsmen organizations to coordinate and manage fishing contests and events to ensure that they are successful while at the same time sustain the resource.

**Actions:**

1. Tournaments. Work with sponsors for good, non-controversial tournaments.
2. Gather Data. Work with organizers of tournaments to gather biological data whenever possible. Coordinate data collection with the MN DNR.
3. Channels Cats. Promote the fisheries including channel catfish to provide good use and positive community identification.