THE WONDERFUL WATERS OF WISCONSIN

YEAR 2

2022 → 2030

Protecting Our Healthy Watersheds And High-Quality Waters

Photo: Kentuck Lake, a high-quality water in Forest, Vilas counties

WISCONSIN DEPT. OF NATURAL RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION

The Healthy Watersheds, High-Quality Waters (HWHQW) Action Plan provides a road map through 2030 for striking a balance between restoring and protecting water resources while emphasizing and celebrating Wisconsin's wonderful waters. To borrow from a familiar saying, the initiative is all about using an ounce of prevention to avoid needing a pound of cure. The HWHQW Action Plan includes a series of actions that the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and a wide range of partners can use to achieve shared goals and objectives.

After identifying Wisconsin's healthiest waters, engaging partner groups in defining the next steps and launching the action plan, a second year of work has gone by. This document highlights some of the progress made during that time, including steps that the department has taken and the successes of community partners who are championing healthy waters protection in the state.

Explore the links below to see how far we've come!

2019 - 2020
HWHQW Modeling & Assessment

April 2021
HWHQW Kickoff Strategy

Spring 2021
Partner Discussion Groups

April 2022
HWHQW Action Plan Launch

March 2024
HWHQW Data Viewer

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) efforts have established Wisconsin as a nationwide leader in water resource protection planning. Wisconsin continues to provide assistance to other federal, state and regional partners embarking on similar proactive efforts to protect water resources before they become impaired.

ANNOUNCEMENT

We are pleased to introduce our new **Watershed Protection Coordinator,** Lauren Haydon! Lauren joined the DNR in November 2023 and focuses on outreach, including modeling and assessment training, increasing awareness about water resources protection and providing technical assistance to partners working on protection projects. Her background ranges from boots-on-the-ground conservation planning and implementation projects to regional program coordination.

For any outreach or training requests, please email **Lauren.Haydon@wisconsin.gov**.

Lauren Haydon paddling on Beaver Lake, a high-quality water in Waukesha County.

It's all about natural land cover! When 75% or more of the watershed is covered by natural land, including wetlands, grasslands and forests, water quality and aquatic habitat support healthy fisheries, wildlife communities and recreational uses. Even permanently protected land requires vigilance to ensure water quality and land use best practices are followed to adequately protect high-quality water resources. To learn more about the connection between natural land cover and water quality, check out the "Protecting Forests For Water Quality" report from the Open Space Institute, a national land conservation organization.

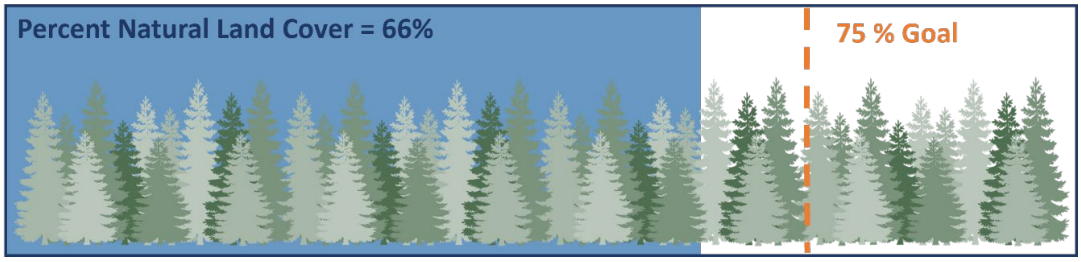

Figure 1. Within the DNR Wisconsin Water Explorer tool, users can explore natural land cover at a watershed scale. This figure displays the percent natural land cover for the Carter Creek Watershed in Adams County.

ACTION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

OBJECTIVE ONE

Increase Capacity To Provide Technical Assistance

- ✓ Launched a new online data viewer in spring 2024.
- ✓ Increased internal DNR awareness of the modeling and assessment results through cross-program trainings.
- ✓ Hired the DNR watershed protection coordinator to support Action Plan objectives.
- ✓ Created a water resources protection toolkit that will be linked to the website by fall 2024.

The High-Quality Waters list will be republished in 2026 in accordance with the Clean Water Act assessment cycle. To date, 2,853 waterbodies have been identified in Wisconsin.

OBJECTIVE TWO

Leverage And Adapt Existing Program Tools To Achieve Results

- ✓ Creating alternative watershed-based planning guidance for protection (a simplified version of a 9-Element Plan) alongside an update of the statewide Nonpoint Source Management Plan.
- ✓ Integrated HWHQW into other statewide and partner planning efforts, including DNR property and master planning and local-level comprehensive planning.

Healthy Waters team members were invited to present the Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin initiative at the EPA Healthy Watersheds Learning Exchange kickoff in February 2024.

OBJECTIVE THREE

Increase Utilization of Funding for Protection

- ✓ The DNR awarded multiple Surface Water Grants to county and lake association partners using HWHQW to restore shorelines and guide lake management plans.
- ✓ Participated in monthly cross-program meetings to explore how state funding sources could expand protection eligibilities.
- ✓ Hosted a workshop between Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan to develop a multiple-state funding vision for forested watershed conservation as part of a Midwest Glacial Lakes Partnership grant.

Approximately $450,000 in 2024 surface water grant funding was invested in community-based lake and river management projects with HWHQW actions and priorities.

OBJECTIVE FOUR

Increase External Awareness

- ✓ Increased awareness of land trusts' important work through a Natural Resource Board field tour and a DNR Natural Resource Magazine article (coming fall 2024!).
- ✓ Presented to the Green Tier Legacy Communities to discuss how municipalities can advance water-resource protection at the local level.

According to a 2021 survey, 67% of Wisconsin family forest owners said water resources protection was an important or very important reason for owning forestland.

Working together, we will find lasting success in protecting healthy waters. Here, we spotlight examples of others' good work to protect the wonderful waters of Wisconsin.

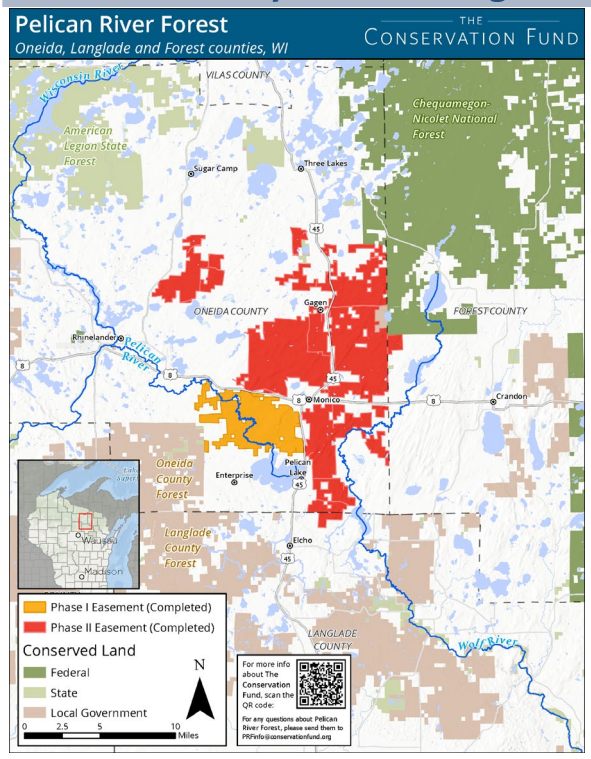

Figure 2. Map of the Pelican River Forest easements.

Making Conservation History In The Pelican River Forest

The DNR's purchase of a conservation easement on 67,000 acres of land in Oneida, Forest and Langlade counties represents the largest forest conservation effort in Wisconsin history. This success was made possible through funding from the USDA Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program, and it was spearheaded by efforts from The Conservation Fund, a national land conservation group that owns the land. The Pelican River Forest is located entirely within the top 30% healthiest watersheds in Wisconsin and is home to over 27,000 acres of forested wetlands and 68 miles of four high-quality waters: the Pelican River, Gudegast Creek, Wolf River and Pedro Creek. These wonderful waters include 7 miles of Class I and II designated cold-water trout streams and the headwaters of the Wolf River, which supplies drinking water to 40,000 people who live downstream. Ensuring the long-term protection of these top-ranked healthy watersheds will provide decades of improved water quality, climate resilience and recreation for all Wisconsinites!

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Protecting Brule River Watersheds Through Resilience-Based Restoration

In 2024, the USDA Forest Service was awarded nearly $1.8 million in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding, predominantly through the Collaborative Aquatic Landscape Restoration Program, to implement the "Brule River Headwaters Restoration Plan" within the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. Chris Ester, the U.S. Forest Service's watershed program manager, explains that this project will address "aging and undersized road and trail stream crossing infrastructure and remnant historic logging dams" across three statewide protection priority watersheds containing high-quality headwater tributaries and critical cold-water habitat for trout. The work, which includes 21 stream crossing replacements and four dam removals, will be completed in partnership with Trout Unlimited, the DNR, Florence, Forest and Vilas counties and Alvin Township. The project also received letters of support from the Sokaogon Chippewa Community and Forest County Potawatomi Community.

The undersized 8-foot culvert at Elvoy Creek in Forest County will be replaced with a 30-foot-wide bridge.

In addition to preventing over 3,000 cubic yards of sediment from entering local streams, these projects will reopen more than 60 miles of fish passage and improve hydrologic connectivity with the surrounding watersheds. Rightsizing stream crossings, such as Elvoy Creek (see image), is an example of how even the most pristine watersheds can benefit from taking a resilience-based restoration approach to maintain the health and function of our wonderful water resources.

To learn more, visit dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/SurfaceWater/HQW.html.