

# THE WONDERFUL WATERS OF WISCONSIN

## YEAR 3

### 2022–2030

## Protecting Our Healthy Watersheds And High-Quality Waters



Pelican River Forest, Oneida County

*Photo Credit: Jay Brittain*

## INTRODUCTION

[The Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin \(WWOW\) 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 Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin Action Plan includes a series of strategies 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 healthy watersheds and high-quality waters (HWHQW), launching the partner-led action plan and developing tools for exploring protection priorities, year three of this statewide initiative was centered on building technical capacity and supporting local protection projects. The 2025 Progress Report highlights steps that the department has taken to implement the Action Plan and the successes of community partners who are championing healthy waters protection in the state.

## Explore The Resources Below To See How Far We've Come!



## ON WISCONSIN!

The department's 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.

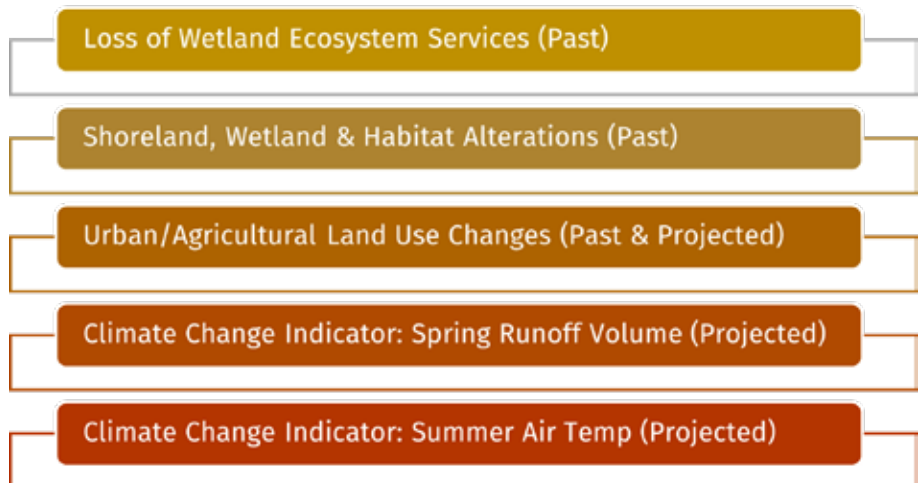
In partnership with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) staff, the department presented on healthy waters monitoring, ongoing protection planning developments and the overall Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin initiative at numerous events, including the 2025 National Monitoring Conference that was held in Green Bay, Great Lakes Region focused EPA Healthy Watersheds Learning Exchange, joint Region 5 and State Clean Water & Drinking Water Directors Meeting and National Training Workshop on Water Quality Data, Assessment and Plans.

### Modeling Vulnerability

Watershed health can be impacted by stressors that contribute to declines in water quality, habitat and ecosystem services such as flood abatement.

As part of the DNR 2021 Healthy Watersheds, High-Quality Waters (HWHQW) modeling and assessment effort, a Vulnerability Index was developed using past and projected trend data to understand current and future threats to healthy waters.

The Vulnerability Index and its individual metrics can be used within planning documents to further identify watershed protection priorities or to help inform best practices that address these threats. For more information on how to use this data, visit the "Modeling and Assessment Results" section on the [DNR website](#).



# ACTION PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

## OBJECTIVE ONE

Increase Capacity To Provide Technical Assistance

- Highlighted the Watershed Protection and Restoration Viewer and the Wisconsin Water Explorer Tool at two statewide conferences
- Increased internal DNR awareness of the modeling and assessment results through cross-program trainings
- Collaborated with counties and regional planning commissions to integrate HWHQW priorities within EPA 9-Element watershed plans and Land & Water Management Plans



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

- Formed and led a workgroup to develop watershed-based planning guidance for protection (a simplified version of a 9-Element Plan)
- Adopted HWHQW priorities and Action Plan objectives within the statewide FY26 Nonpoint Source Management Plan update
- Updated the Clean Water Act Section 303(d) Vision 2.0 to promote a balanced approach to restoration and protection



Collaborated with the EPA on a “Protecting Healthy Waters” session topic at the 2025 National Monitoring Conference in Green Bay, WI.

## OBJECTIVE THREE

Increase Utilization Of Funding For Protection

- Met with DNR grant teams to identify opportunities for expanding protection considerations in project eligibility and ranking criteria
- Collaborated with Environmental Loans staff to explore EPA protection resources for state revolving loan programs
- Updated the County Lake Grants guidance within the DNR Surface Water Grant program to encourage projects that align with the Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin Action Plan priorities



Approximately **\$320,000** in 2025 surface water grant funding was invested in community-based lake and river management projects with HWHQW actions and priorities.

## OBJECTIVE FOUR

Increase External Awareness

- Promoted protection success stories, training opportunities and funding updates through the HWHQW GovDelivery newsletter
- Organized a quarterly Wisconsin Lakes & Rivers partnership call focused on the Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin and the Healthy Lakes & Rivers program
- Supported partners in generating press releases that celebrate local high-quality water resources



According to a [2025 statewide poll of Wisconsin voters](#), 89% of voters agree that protecting water quality in rivers and streams is very/extremely important. 94% of voters agree that protecting water quality and land is critical to the state’s economy.



# PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

## Celebrating A Decade Of Healthy Lakes And Rivers



The Healthy Lakes & Rivers (HLR) program is celebrating 10 years of partnership and improving the health of Wisconsin's wonderful waters! In addition to efforts that protect and maintain natural shorelines, the five HLR best practices are a simple and inexpensive way to enhance natural land cover in Healthy Watersheds and protect High-Quality Waters that are vulnerable to impacts from runoff and shoreline erosion. Since the program was established in 2015, the DNR Surface Water Grant program has awarded nearly \$2 million in HLR cost-share grants to install best practices on over 1,000 shoreland properties on 205 lakes and rivers across 38 counties. Visit [the Healthy Lakes & Rivers website](#) to get started!

## Wild Rivers Trout Unlimited Chapter Leads Vigilance Effort In White River Fishery Area



When natural land cover, such as forests and wetlands, is permanently protected, vigilance is needed to address threats to fish and wildlife communities and maximize water quality benefits. Within the [White River Fishery Area](#) in Bayfield County, the DNR Fisheries Management team has been removing invasive buckthorn and recently partnered with the [Wild Rivers Trout Unlimited Chapter](#) to plant native trees and restore critical riparian habitat along the South Fork White River, a high-quality water and [designated priority water by Trout Unlimited](#). In June 2025, Trout Unlimited Chapter volunteers, local students from

Ashland High School and DNR Fisheries staff held their second annual event and planted over 1,100 white spruce trees funded by Trout Unlimited and a DNR Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Grant.

## Preserving A Hidden Family Gem: Lake Helene State Natural Area

In 2009, the DNR Statewide Natural Area Wild Lakes Program purchased 400 acres of forested land and scattered wetlands that encompass [Lake Helene](#), a 51-acre seepage lake and high-quality water in northern Sawyer County, from the Culver Gilbertson family, who owned it for 57 years. Despite this change in ownership, the family considered themselves “stewards of the land up until last year,” thanks to a 15-year tenancy agreement that allowed them to continue enjoying access to the lake and original 1940s cabin. With the end of the tenancy agreement, the DNR can now proceed with removing all buildings, properly abandoning utilities and restoring the shoreline where a small pier and boat house were located. Thanks to the stewardship of the Culver Gilbertson family and DNR conservation staff, this special and wild place will continue to serve as a hidden gem for those who seek it.



To learn more, visit [dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/SurfaceWater/HQW.html](https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/SurfaceWater/HQW.html)