



WICOLA

White Iron Chain of Lakes
Association
P.O. Box 493
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We are providing our comments concerning the Rainy River Headwaters/Vermilion River Watershed Planning Area Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan Development. It is WICOLA's mission to champion high water quality and a healthy lake ecosystem in the White Iron Chain of Lakes watershed which is part of the Rainy River Headwaters watershed.

Fortunately, we see watershed planning within our waters as a role on conserving and protecting the outstanding water quality we currently enjoy vs restoration. The WICOLA Board has approved six priorities focused on protecting our water quality by working with lake shore owners and lake users along with collaborating with others to protect our waters.

An important part of any watershed plan should be periodic water testing at MPCA determined test sites. WICOLA has been active for years doing monthly water monitoring on five lakes from May through September each year collection 50 samples per year. We also sample for heavy metals in the water column and sediment about every 5 to 7 years. This data builds an important database we use for reporting and for future trend research analysis. The plan should be designed to encourage more such testing throughout the watershed.

Aquatic Invasive Species has been a major concern on our watershed and elsewhere for many years. Considerable time and costs are expended for education and prevention efforts by many groups including WICOLA. The watershed plan should address ongoing efforts for both education and the prevention of spreading AIS within our waters. Efforts should be made to increase funding for watercraft inspections and exploring other options such as the DNR Lake Pledge, roadside inspections, and other requirements for vessels moved between waterbodies. WICOLA has continued to be active with pioneering bait disposal bins, working with both county SWCD inspection programs, and promoting educational events including three Ely festivals. The plan should promote these activities as well.

An important aspect of our watershed is Subsurface Sewage Treatment Systems (SSTS). Although much of the watershed is within public wild lands, there are sufficient residential structures and other real estate improvements to warrant attention to SSTS. The plan should address providing public education on SSTS maintenance, best practices, and operations to ensure that these systems function as designed. Licensing and inspection for new properties should also be emphasized. Finally, perhaps a program could be started providing funding assistance for upgrades to older systems through a self-replenishing revolving loan fund.



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The Rainy River Headwaters has risk of degradation of the high-quality water we now enjoy from proposed Copper-Nickle mining projects. This is a hotly debated issue and is a potential factor in our future water quality. At WICOLA, we have encouraged members to stay informed on the issue and to be active in supporting whichever side they believe is appropriate. Our water plans should make the same effort to encourage stakeholders and the public to be as informed as possible on the topic.

A major component of our watershed plan should include shoreland management practices, requirements, and education. One key within our WICOLA watershed is maintenance of buffer zones to protect wildlife and fisheries habitat. These zones not only minimize erosion but provide a wilderness feel to our shorelines along with minimizing visual impacts such as light pollution. We recommend that these issues are addressed in the plan encouraging best practices which exceed current zoning requirements. Additionally, help should be facilitated to allow for restoration of buffer zones on properties that currently lack buffers. Education of the watershed stakeholders on shoreline issues is also key.

Finally, education and outreach partnerships should be a component of our watershed plan. Education of our stakeholders is an extremely important aspect of managing any watershed. The more knowledgeable water users are of the resource, the better the care they will provide. At WICOLA we are always looking for ways to provide information not only to our members, but also to the public. These encounters include festivals, newsletters, and social media platforms. We also leverage this work with partner groups including county SWCD programs, the BWCA Coalition, FireWise programs, and both state and federal agencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input.

Sincerely,

The White Iron Chain of Lakes Association