

Subcommittee on Minnesota Water Policy

Upper Mississippi Initiative

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Lake and Stream Protection in the Upper Mississippi River Basin (Mississippi Headwaters) -- Forest conservation to protect water quality and quantity. A comprehensive program is needed to provide policy and planning to protect our most highly valued waters for future generations. Intact forests absorb rainfall and reduce runoff which protects the excellent water quality that still exists in the Upper Mississippi River Basin (UMRB). Protecting water quality in the best fishing lakes and streams in the UMRB is within reach. Based on DNR research, maintaining 75 percent of forestland cover in a watershed is critical for protecting water quality. These important forests also protect the source for our drinking water in the Twin Cities Metro. This initiative focuses on priority lakes and streams located in the UMRB. It will apply existing strategies and methodologies that have been developed by the DNR, BWSR, SWCDs, and other partners to protect these systems. We can rapidly ensure future water quality at a reasonable cost by targeting critical areas.

Recommendation: Create a Priority Lakes and Streams Initiative Fund to support incremental progress toward water protection goals in the UMRB. An initial legislative appropriation of \$5 million is requested for the 2025 session to ramp up planning and implementation of the Priority Lakes and Streams Initiative (Legislative history: 2024: HF1394; SF2192) Fischer/McEwen). Total costs to protect the watersheds of twenty-six high priority lakes identified in local One Watershed One Plans are estimated to be \$82 million to protect 45,570 acres needed with forest conservation easements. Total costs would be achieved through coordinated proposals to the Clean Water Council, LCCMR, and LSOHC over a ten-year period. Another 45,570 acres would be protected by the Sustainable Forest Incentives Act (SFIA) program (which is already funded by the state of Minnesota's general fund).

The Initiative Fund would also be used to protect remaining forests in the Straight River Groundwater Management Area which have been under intense conversions to irrigated agriculture. The aquifer that supplies water to this important trout stream (and many private wells) has become contaminated with nitrate. Costs to protect 4,400 acres of the remaining forestlands would be \$8 million. Additional acres would be protected with SFIA as well.

These recommendations total 95,540 acres, which aligns closely with the related goal of the Clean Water Council to protect 100,000 acres of private forestland in the UMRB. It also incorporates local priorities developed through BWSR's One Watershed One Plan Program. Furthermore, this initiative directly supports the implementation of Minnesota's Forest Action Plan (FAP), as well as other state agency policies.