

Sportsmen play role in St. Louis River Estuary Summit, recovery

By Jim Servi

Contributing Writer

Superior, Wis. — The St. Louis River flow of 179 miles makes it the largest Lake Superior tributary, draining 3,634 square miles. As it enters Lake Superior near Duluth and Superior, the St. Louis River creates an estimated 12,000-acre freshwater estuary that provides critical habitat for hundreds of species of animals, birds, and fish.

However, this estuary has been listed as a federal "area of concern" since 1987. Because of this, there's an ongoing effort to restore the river as close as possible to its natural state. That work was the focus on the 2014 St. Louis River Estuary Summit in late February that brought together more than 200 natural resources managers, scientists, researchers, and concerned citizens. According to Becky Sapper, event coordinator, "This summit has grown every year since it started three years ago."

The past three summits have focused on the natural science side, but this year, "summiters" tried to look at the human side of the estuary.

"This is where sportsmen come in," Sapper said. "We'd love to hear their thoughts on how to improve this area."

River managers want to take into account community use of the estuary and want citizens to lead the management goals. Sapper provided an example of

how sportsmen already are helping in this process. One fisherman said he and his friends weren't catching fish in a certain area during the winter, but had a lot of luck during other times of the year. After some research, it was determined that there were low oxygen levels in that area. The placement of aerators then improved the winter fishery.

It's important to back up a little bit to understand how the St. Louis River Estuary became an area of concern (AOC). In 1972, the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement was signed. It was updated in 1987. During that update, 43 AOCs were established based on 14 criteria. One of these AOCs was the St. Louis River Estuary, since it was deficient in nine of the 14 listed criteria:

- Restrictions on fish and wildlife consumption;
- Excessive loading of sediment and nutrients;
- Degradation of fish and wildlife populations;
- Beach closings;
- Fish tumors or other deformities;
- Degradation of aesthetics;
- Degradation of benthos (organisms that live on the bottom

of bodies of water);

- Restriction on dredging activities;
- Loss of fish and wildlife habitat.

In 1992, the first remedial action plan was created focusing on the 39 miles of the river below Cloquet, Minn. Shortly afterward, a citizen advisory committee was formed that later became the St. Louis River Alliance, which decided to bring everyone together for a summit.

There are federal players, too, including the Environmental Protection Agency and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. State agencies include the Wisconsin DNR, the Minnesota DNR, and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, as well as a host of county and local groups from both states that all have a stake in cleaning up the river and estuary.

"This summit was established to get everyone on the same page and working together," Sapper said.

Matt Steiger, Wisconsin DNR water resources management specialist, provided an in-depth look at the restoration plan. According to Steiger, habitat restoration is one of the key focus areas. He said

the goal is to restore half of the damaged habitat to its original state, which amounts to roughly 1,700 acres.

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This will be no easy feat since there are established industries in much of the estuary, and restoration typically centers on areas that are removed from commercial activity. Historically, there were shallow bays throughout this area that were ideal rooting zones for emergent vegetation (needed by waterfowl) and certain species of fish need to thrive. However, due to dredging, these 5- to 10-foot bays turned into 30-foot bays. These areas will all have to be filled to the suitable depth to encourage the correct vegetation to take hold as part of habitat restoration.

With more than 50 specific actions that the group is trying to complete, and the need for millions of dollars for the work, the groups are aiming for 2025 as a completion goal.

"It may seem like a long time, but it is a very aggressive approach to a project of this magnitude," Steiger said.

As with most things, one of the main issues is funding. With the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and NOAA choosing this project as a focus area, groups are seeing additional funding and hope to have approximately half of the original impairments fixed in the next few years.

They've already had much success during the past several years, according to Steiger and Sapper. Water quality has improved, mercury levels have declined, and sturgeon have successfully spawned in the area for the first time in more than 100 years. Almost 55,000 tons of petroleum-contaminated sediment in and around Newton Creek and the Hog Island inlet have been removed, and habitat restoration has been completed in many locations, including Grassy Point, Tallus Island, Clough Island, and Spirit Island.