



ANNUAL REPORT 2023

Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates is your trusted advisor and advocate for Minnesota's lake and river communities.



Photo credit: Kevin Corrigan



MLR supports local capacity with organizing, science, media, programs and professional advocacy in St. Paul.

From Executive Director Jeff Forester

Greetings,

2023 was a great year and MLR was able to achieve remarkable success legislatively. We also ramped up our capacity with a number of new staff members. In these pages you will get an overview of the work MLR did to protect a core, shared value - our lake and river heritage.

My family has had a place on a Minnesota Lake since 1910. It is where we gather each summer, like salmon returning to the waters of our birth. The memories formed there, the skills and ethics learned, the values we have passed down are central to me. I know that I speak for the MLR board and staff when I say it is our honor to work every day to ensure this heritage persists for our children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and beyond.

In 2023 MLR gained a great deal of capacity by filling a number of key staff positions.

Sami Selter, who has a deep experience with managing AIS and lake management, joined the MLR team as Associate Executive Director. Sami has a Masters Degree in Environmental Education and worked for years doing aquatic plant surveys and treating for various AIS.

Lily Carr is MLR's Civic Organizer/Program Manager. She is focused on improving and expanding the Lake Steward Program, managing the Stop Starry Program, and building a deeper base of lake advocates across the state to fight AIS and other lake impairments with on the ground actions and choices.

Elan Rochell-Share is taking on special projects and helping with communications. Elan is an excellent writer, highly organized and passionate about lakes and rivers. Every summer Elan



MLR Executive Director Jeff Forester (left) and House Environment and Natural Resources Chair Rep. Rick Hansen connect at DNR Roundtable.

leads youth into the BWCA as a trip leader, passing clean water values down to the next generation.

Our Work Is Urgent

There is a lot of bad news regarding water quality in Minnesota today. AIS continues to spread, runoff pollution is driving algae blooms and water impairments, aquifers are being over pumped. You and I can see these changes off the end of our docks.

Still, I have hope. YOU are my hope. In my role as Executive Director I meet people like you who are committed to water. There are Lake and River Advocates all across Minnesota. By bringing all of us together, MLR is building a civic force large enough, well enough informed, and committed enough to change the disturbing water quality trends we face today. By joining

MLR and supporting this work, you become a part of the solution.

MLR's added capacity **will expand the programs and public policy work that protect the waters off the end of your dock. They provide you with the opportunity to engage in protecting your lake and river heritage. MLR will strengthen and deepen the "powerful links" among lake advocates and policy makers outlined in the MLR Mission statement.**

If you would like MLR to speak at your lake association meeting or some other event, please email Sami Selter at sami@mnlakesandrivers.org

Thank you for this opportunity to serve you and the public good of clean and healthy lake ecosystems.

Please stay in touch,

Jeff Forester, Executive Director

Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates Identity and Mission Statement

"Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates protects Minnesota's lake and river heritage for current and future generations by forging powerful links among lakes, lake advocates, and policy makers."



Photo credit: Kevin Corrigan

MLR Organizes Base to Meet This Moment

In 2023 Minnesota Lakes and Rivers engaged in a deep outreach and listening effort. MLR staff attended over 100 in-person meetings with lake association leaders and members, Tribes, state agencies, researchers and local partners.

Thank you to the many people who participated in this work.

Here's what we learned:

Only a large and growing base of civic advocates can improve water quality and protect Minnesota's lake and river heritage.

The health of our lakes and rivers in Minnesota depends on the health of the government and non-government institutions dedicated to their protection.

Our listening sessions worked to define the challenges facing our lakes and rivers, AND the challenges facing the networks of lake associations and advocates working to protect and restore them.

This information was critically important as the MLR Board held our strategic planning retreat in November of 2023 and organized this outreach effort into a set of Strategic Priorities.

Thanks to everyone who met with us, invited us to events, emailed, or called. And a special shoutout to those who hosted us or helped spread the word about MLR. Your support and connections are greatly appreciated!

Define the Problem - Water Quality is Declining in Minnesota

Lake associations face increasing threats to the lakes they protect, with accelerating degradation taking place. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's list of impaired surface waters reached an alarming 56% in 2021, with 54 more water bodies added in November 2023.

The biggest drivers of water quality impairment are:

- Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) spread,
- Runoff pollution from large commercial agricultural activities (phosphorus, nitrogen, pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides),
- Sulfide pollution from mining operations,
- Destructive shoreline development and boating practices,
- Climate-induced warming.

MLR is working to address each of these threats. A larger and growing base of active lake advocates is critical to success in resolving any of them.

Advocates Lack Authority but We Can Develop More Power

Lake associations have limited authority over regulations, enforcement, and spending that affect the lakes and rivers they steward. Government agencies, despite their authority, struggle to wield power effectively in natural resource efforts and must contend with entrenched special interests. Enforcement and permitting, especially the variance process, rely on engaged citizens for true effectiveness.

Minnesota allocates roughly \$250 million annually towards water quality improvement, supplemented by federal funds, Tribal initiatives, involvement from three state agencies, and numerous local government units. However, fragmented efforts persist due to poor coordination among agencies and overlapping jurisdictions. Because the sources of impairment are so widespread and discrete, citizens groups are invaluable at creating a climate for change through influence and organization.

Our outreach this past year revealed that citizen groups can play a vital role in convening diverse governmental stakeholders and coordinating efforts to safeguard water quality - Citizens can overcome governmental silos.

An Expanding Base of Committed Citizens is the Most Critical Lake-Protection Strategy

Profit-driven entities invest heavily in maintaining the status quo, posing challenges for effective government intervention. To enact meaningful change and safeguard resources for future generations, a well-coordinated statewide organization is necessary to challenge entrenched special interests. Citizen-driven efforts are essential for driving this change and securing a better future for our descendants.

A Model to Protect Lake and River Heritage

In Minnesota, around 70,000 pheasant hunters recognized the decline in pheasant numbers in the 1980s and organized Pheasants Forever, with 46,000 members. In response to dwindling waterfowl populations in the late 1970s, duck hunters formed Ducks Unlimited. With approximately 90,000 duck licenses sold in the state, over 60,000 hunters

are members of Ducks Unlimited. These organized efforts have stabilized and even improved pheasant and duck populations by enhancing their habitats, benefiting other wildlife dependent on these ecosystems as well.

56% of Minnesota's surface waters are listed as impaired by the MPCA. It is time for lake lovers to follow the model of Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited.

Take Action to Protect Your Lake and River Heritage

- If you are not yet a supporter, use the form in this Annual Report to join MLR,
- If you ARE a member, share this Annual Report with your friends and neighbors. Encourage them to support this work.
- Share MLR information at your lake association meetings and other public meetings and encourage people to support this work.

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St. Paul, 6:30 PM, May 18, 2023

Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates' (MLR) professional lobbying and the grassroots advocacy of lake associations and MLR members combined to support passage of the sweeping 450 page Environment and Natural Resources Conference Committee Report, HF 2310. Supporters recognize the package as, "the most significant in Minnesota History."

Gains Made in Advancing Clean Water and Property Tax Relief on Shorelands

MLR has led professional lobbying at the capitol since 1994. Never have the stakes been higher. After years of unspent revenues due to legislative gridlock, billions in unspent federal Covid relief and a strengthening economy, Minnesota had a \$17.8 billion budget surplus.

This once in a generation surplus drew a stampede of special interest lobbyists all pushing and elbowing for a spot at the trough.

The competition was intense.

In addition, the 2023 Legislative Session followed a 'once a decade' census with new legislative districts and every state elected official up for election. Thirty five percent of Minnesota's State Representatives were new to the Minnesota House in 2023, and 36% of elected Senators had never served in the Senate before. The need to educate

these newly elected legislators was huge.

As former legislator Darby Nelson said, "From practical experience I can tell you that legislators lead very, very busy lives. They can't know everything about everything. That's where lobbyists and constituents play very, very important roles."

MLR's bipartisan reputation, our long term credibility, and, most importantly, our engaged membership base, allowed us to make remarkable progress towards our goals of protecting our lake and river heritage for future generations.

"In the end, we are very pleased with the outcomes," said Forester, "but this session was not a sustainable model for success. If we want to protect our lakes and rivers going forward, **job number one is to increase our membership base so that we can build a sustainable water quality advocacy effort. I ask every MLR member who cares about our mission to join us in asking everyone who benefits from MLR to become a contributing member.**"

Through outreach and listening sessions with our members, MLR developed a large and aspirational legislative agenda.

We worked in two specific areas:

1. Reduce the property tax pressure on shoreland property,
2. Protect and restore lakes and rivers in Minnesota.

Property Tax Relief

Even though we were unable to convince the Legislature to provide a direct property tax rebate, the final tax package provided a variety of measures that should help lower the property tax pressure on shoreline properties:

- An \$80 million increase in County Program Aid to offset property taxes each year (base increase),
- Increased Payment In Lieu of Taxes, (PILT) for counties with high public land ownership to \$9.3 million. PILT provides support for local governments with non

taxable public lands in their boundaries,

- Increased the homestead market value credit which will help reduce the tax burden on homestead properties, on lake shore or in town,
- Excluded Social Security from \$100,000 of income, an important issue since the average age of a lake home and cabin owner in Minnesota is 63,
- Included \$15 million boost for Soil and Water Conservation Districts, which are largely funded by local property tax revenues even though they protect the state's public waters.

Protection of our Lake and River Heritage

House Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Chair, Rep. Rick Hansen said, during his closing arguments on the House floor, "A number of provisions in this bill have been waiting a very long time.... But we started to crack the regulatory capture that does exist in this state, and that happens with the people," not the special interests. Rep. Rick Hansen continued, "It's a proposal that corrects past wrongs, recognizes the present and prepares for the future," adding the bill is about problem-solving. "There are topics here we have discussed for many years that it provides solution for," according to the [Minnesota House of Representatives Daily](#).

The 2023 legislature addressed many lake and river issues that have been priorities for lake associations and lake home and cabin owners for many years:

- Creates a watercraft operators education and certification requirement to increase boater safety, reduce user conflicts, and advance Best Practices to prevent resource degradation due to poor wake and prop thrust management.
- Provides \$1 million for *Get the Lead Out* programs and lead tackle prohibition on designated swan and loon reproduction lakes in the metro area,
- *Keep It Clean* - Outlaws storing garbage and other waste on ice outside fish houses,
- Funds an interdisciplinary team at the University of Minnesota to model the

quality and quantity of Minnesota's water resources 50 years in the future,

- Spends \$2 million the first year and \$2 million the second year for Lawns to Legumes which can be used to help owners install native shoreline buffers,
- Ends commercial turtle harvest in Minnesota,
- Provides for biosecure bait importation into Minnesota to address minor shortages,
- Provides funding for study and management of native "rough" fishes, including the bigmouth buffalo fish, a native that can live over 100 years,
- Provides \$35 million to upgrade Minnesota's watercraft accesses and include AIS prevention features,
- Study and mitigation of recent large scale fish kill events in Minnesota,
- Provides funding for AIS or water quality projects to Stearns COLA, Lake Alice, French Lake, and Round Lake.

Other Benefits to Water Quality in Minnesota

Earlier in the session the Legislature passed an authorization to send a ballot measure to voters to re-establish



DNR Commissioner Sarah Strommen testifies before the House Environment and Natural Resources Finance and Policy Committee March 28 in favor of HF2310, the committee's omnibus budget bill. (Photo by Catherine Davis)

Aquatic Invasive Species

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MLR has advocated for a comprehensive statewide plan, with the input of all significant partners, including lake associations, to organize and leverage programs and capacities.

This year the Legislature agreed that Minnesota needs a comprehensive statewide plan to prevent the spread of Aquatic Invasive Species, AIS. HF 2310 requires the MN DNR, by December 31st, 2023, and every five years after that, work with, “lake associations, local citizen groups, and local units of government in the development and implementation,” of a comprehensive statewide AIS management plan.

Minnesota invests millions of dollars annually to provide inspection at our watercraft access sites in order to find the few that are infested with AIS. But once we find these few infested watercraft, we fail to ensure that the boat or water related equipment is fully decontaminated. Current law stated that an AIS inspector could only order a decontamination of a watercraft *if a decontamination unit was available on site*. Otherwise the inspector refuses launch at that site and leaves the decontamination up to the boat owner. We spend millions finding a needle in a haystack, and once we find one, we toss it back in the haystack.



Language in HF 2310 provides authority for a conservation officer, licensed peace officer or AIS inspector to prevent launch of infested water related equipment and order decontamination *even if there is no decon unit on-site*. This simple language

is perhaps the biggest step forward in AIS management since eurasian watermilfoil was first discovered in Lake Minnetonka.

The Legislature awarded Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates \$250,000 to expand and deepen our Stop Starry program and other AIS efforts.

Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center

Starting in 2012, Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates began working with Dr. Peter Sorenson to establish what would become the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center, MAISRC. Funding for the MAISRC and its programs has mostly been provided by grants from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. Legislators committed an **additional \$3 million over the next biennium, base funding of \$2 million for MAISRC, plus an additional \$1 million for the Labs to Lakes. The legislation also provides \$1 million for Invasive Carp control measures.**

In 2023 the legislature resolved many perennial ecological issues like Chronic

Wasting Disease or PFAS pollution in water, but also integrated environmental efforts moving forward. For instance not only are there clean water provisions, but also soil health and reforestation initiatives. Soil erosion and deforestation are two significant contributors to declining lake and river health.



Minnesota Lakes and Rivers - Protecting the waters off the end of your dock

the Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources, LCCMR, which dedicates proceeds from the Minnesota Lottery to the Environment. Without this authorization, the LCCMR and ENRTF would have expired in 2025.

The LCCMR reviews hundreds of environmentally focused grant requests each year. It is the primary source of funding for research and applied science, including the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center.

In 2021 the ENRTF awarded MLR a \$1 million grant to install over 20 boat cleaning stations at accesses infested with starry stonewort.

This year the LCCMR approved a grant request by the St. Anthony Falls Lab to study the impacts of wakes and prop thrust on lake ecology.

Aquatic Invasive Species Funding and Policy

Since 2009, MLR has recognized that no organization can execute a successful AIS program in isolation. Lake associations, local governments and MN DNR are all spending millions annually and have a role in AIS prevention. For the last decade

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Celebrating Over \$100 Million in County AIS Prevention Aid Formula



Photo credit: Kevin Corrigan

Ten years ago MLR recognized that the MN DNR could not adequately manage either the prevention or treatment of AIS in Minnesota. The agency did not have the resources needed to protect lakes from infestation or manage lakes already infested, they did not have the scientific capacity to drive innovation. But most importantly they did not have the capacity to be responsive to the local communities that would be most impacted by AIS spread and the resulting degradation of local water resources.

MLR took this problem to Sen. Rod Skoe, Chair of the Senate Taxes Committee, and worked with him to advance his solution. Sen. Skoe's County AIS Prevention Aid Formula directed **\$10 million annually** to counties, apportioned by the number of water access and access parking spots in each county.

The County AIS Prevention Aid Formula sent funding to the people that had the most urgency in AIS prevention, local government units (local) that were more responsive, collaborative and nimble than the larger state agency, the MN DNR.

Sen. Skoe understood that the larger the role citizens played in working to solve the problem, the more efficient and effective AIS efforts would be. At the time of its passage, the County AIS Prevention Aid program received national attention from

AIS programs nationwide, and was widely praised as a significant innovation.

Since 2014, when the law was passed, over \$100 million has gone into local AIS efforts. This funding has paid for local AIS inspection efforts at public landings, decontamination, AIS outreach and education, AIS management and grants to lake associations for their AIS efforts.

After a decade in place, it is time to take stock of the promises of this program, and the outcomes:

1. The goal was to provide funding in the most engaged, collaborative and transparent way to support local communities.
2. Many Counties had AIS programs at that time. The County AIS Prevention Aid should not supplant existing County AIS Programming.
3. Sen. Skoe and MLR hoped that by including the lake associations doing the work in the AIS planning, they would be able to leverage the local passion of the citizens. In many areas of the state this has been the case.
4. Sen. Skoe put very few requirements on the funds in an effort to spark innovation and allow enough flexibility for different areas to put programs in place that reflected local conditions.
5. Sen. Skoe hoped that providing this funding would foster communication and cooperation among the MN DNR, County AIS Managers and lake associations. To this end Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates hosted Aquatic Invaders Summits in 2014, 2016 and 2018. Attendees included representatives from the MAISRC, lake associations, MN DNR, tribes and county AIS programs. These events drew over 450 people. Attendees developed both the Local AIS Action Framework and the MN DNR Reporting form.



Photo credit: Kevin Corrigan

The Future of the County AIS Prevention Aid Program

There are four primary AIS programs in MN:

- The MN DNR spends about \$8 million on AIS activities,
- The County AIS Prevention Aid Formula sends \$10 million to the counties,
- Lake associations spend \$6 million in voluntary contributions,
- The Tribes spend millions to protect and manage the waters in their care.

One of the biggest gaps in our efforts is a lack of alignment among these four. In 2023, MLR successfully championed legislation requiring the MN DNR to create a comprehensive and coordinated statewide plan for AIS efforts, including these four AIS programs.

One thing is clear, after a decade, treatment of existing AIS is eating into the Prevention Aid Formula dollars. **It is time for MN to establish reliable and ongoing AIS Management Grants that meet the need.**

There is a need to re-start the bi-annual Aquatic Invaders Summit to bring together lake advocates, lake associations, county AIS coordinators, agency AIS managers, and federal AIS managers.

The Tribes, which manage a significant portion of Minnesota's open water, should be included in future County AIS Prevention Aid Formula disbursements.

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Balance Sheet for Fiscal Years Ending December 31, 2022 and 2023

Assets	2022	2023
Cash	\$46,166	\$40,208
Accounts Receivable	0	\$34,721
Fixed Assets	\$895	0
Total Assets	\$47,061	\$74,929

Liabilities & Equity	2022	2023
Net Assets	\$47,061	\$74,929
Total Liabilities & Net Assets	\$47,061	\$74,929

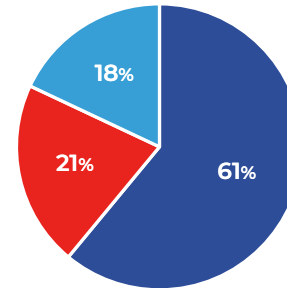
Expense Allocation

Program	\$179,695
Management & General Expenses	\$61,733
Fundraising	\$51,796
Total without CD3 Boat Cleaning Stations	\$293,224
Stop Starry ENTRF Grant CD3 Boat Cleaning Stations	\$71,482
Total Expenses	\$364,706

Revenue

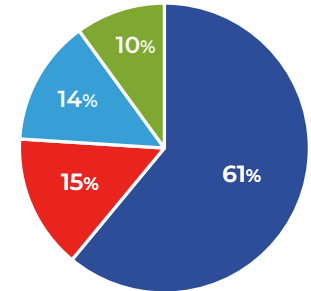
Contributions from Individuals	\$196,475
Contributions from Lake Associations	\$49,286
State AIS Grants	\$43,619
Other revenue	\$31,689
Total Revenue without CD3 Boat Cleaning Stations	\$321,069
Stop Starry ENTRF Grant CD3 Boat Cleaning Stations	\$71,465
Total Revenue	\$392,534

Expense Allocation



■ Program
■ Mgmt & General Expenses
■ Fundraising

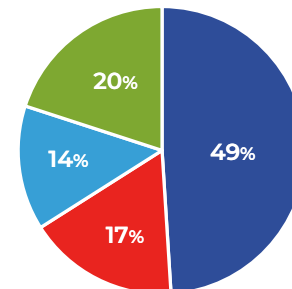
Revenue



■ Individuals ■ Lake Assn
■ Grants ■ Other

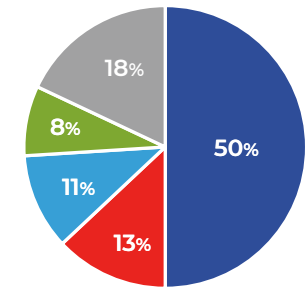
Allocations including CD3 Boat Cleaning Stations

Expense Allocation



■ Program ■ Fundraising
■ Mgmt & General Expenses
■ CD3 Boat Cleaning Stations

Revenue



■ Individuals ■ Lake Assn
■ Grants ■ Other
■ Stop Starry ENTRF Grant CD3 Boat Cleaning Stations

Individuals

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Tom Nelson & Mary
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Catherine Schmoker
Steve & Jill Shipley
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Jeff Stabnow
Mark Stuck
Lloyd & Ingrid Thyen
Dr. Dorothy Whitmer & Dr.
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Steve Yacyshyn

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Photo credit: Kevin Corrigan

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Photo credit: Kevin Corrigan

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Association
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Association
Hubbard County COLA
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Association (WBLLA)

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Becker COLA
Burntside Lake Association
(BLA)
Clamshell Bertha Lake
Association (CBLA)
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We Govern Using Civic Standards

We work with key stakeholders to define the problem. We develop a solution with all partners contributing time, expertise, funding or constituents to that solution. By working with partners to solve issues at the local level, we can focus on advancing solutions at the legislature that already have a broad base of support. We actively serve the public good as we work to protect a lake and river heritage for current and future generations.



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Photo credit: Kevin Corrigan