It takes time, and a lot of people to make water cleaner

May 2013 Snapshots

If you are fishing in the metro area next week for the 2013 opener, you may notice the water is clearer than in past years.

Recently, Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) staff reviewed clarity data for 80 lakes in the metro area, and found that overall, the clarity of metro area lakes is better than a generation ago.

Trend analysis results showed over the last 30 years, more than 94 percent of metro lakes are either improving or maintaining clarity. While many of the assessed lakes remained stable, more lakes showed an improving water quality trend than a negative trend, even as the seven-county metro area population went from 2.0 million to 2.9 million (U.S. Census Bureau).

Out of the 13 regionally significant lakes, seven showed clarity trends improving, five remained stable and one showed decreasing trends (table at right).

Lake Name	Clarity Trend*
Bald Eagle	=
Big Carnelian	+
Big Marine	+
Calhoun	+
Forest	=
Harriet	=
Independence	=
Medicine	=
Minnetonka	+
Nokomis	=
Upper Prior Lake	+
Lower Prior Lake	=
Square Lake	-
Waconia	+
White Bear	+

**from 2010 Secchi Transparency Trend Summary, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency*

"It's easy to think water quality is getting worse in the metro area, because you only tend to hear about negative problems in our waters, like the drawdown of White Bear Lake or invasive species in Lake Minnetonka," said Steve Woods, BWSR Assistant Director. "But, there are countless local governments, communities, and citizens across the metro that are making noticeable improvements to our waters."

Woods attributes the improving trends of metro lakes to the work carried out by watershed management organizations over the past 30 years under the Metropolitan Surface Water Management Act (enacted in 1982). According to Woods, the metro area has seen a dramatic increase in the expertise needed to negotiate the complex legal, scientific, policy, and financial landscape associated with water resources during this time period.

"Local governments across the metro are leading the state, and arguably the nation, in water-resource management planning and implementation," Woods said. "From the ultra-urban core of the Twin Cities to the outer suburbs, cities, counties, soil and water conservation districts and watershed management organizations are continuously analyzing data, setting priorities and implementing projects grounded in sound science through local partnerships to improve and protect area water resources."

Several lakes across the metro that were previously considered 'impaired,' for not meeting water quality standards no longer have that label. In 2012, Keller, Beaver, Carver and Battle Creek Lakes in the Ramsey Washington Metro Watershed District (RWMWD) were assessed as 'not impaired' by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA). The MPCA now proposes to remove these lakes from the state's impaired waters list.

RWMWD Administrator Cliff Aichinger said, "We implemented improvements upstream of all of these lakes over the last 15 years and our efforts are paying off." Aichinger added that cities have played an important role in cleaning up lakes in the district.

Other lakes that are now meeting water quality standards in the metro area include Powderhorn Lake in the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District and McKusick Lake in the Middle St. Croix Watershed Management Organization.

Are there still problems with metro area lakes? “Of course,” said Woods. “Our data review only looked at clarity trends. While the overall state of metro area lakes is good, lakes are complex systems. In addition to current challenges that watershed organizations face, there are always new challenges like severe weather events, increasing chloride and pharmaceutical concentrations and the threat of aquatic invasive species to manage.”

Lake Minnetonka is one metro area lake that has shown improvements for water clarity over the last 30 years. Photo courtesy of the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District.