

## How a Waseca Community Rallied to Rescue a Troubled Lake

The people living in and around Waseca, Minnesota, have been coming together to defend the integrity of their beloved Clear Lake since the late 1800s. They're still at it today.

Nearly 150 years ago the community helped to successfully fight off a proposal to drain the lake to boost water flow for the benefit of downstream grain mills. Over the coming decades they also protested the introduction of common carp when it was mistakenly thought carp would become a popular food staple as they were in Europe. They also rallied against the practice of allowing sewage to flow into storm drains, battled algae blooms, and dealt with an exploding rough fish population more than once.



Today it's a recreational center point for locals and visitors alike, with four public parks along its shoreline, and though the public's interest and energy level may have waned from time to time, local stakeholders always rose to meet the next challenge. As it did in 2001 when resident Duane Rathmann founded the Waseca Lakes Association (WLA). The organization helped revitalize citizen participation in lake management, and among other things, worked with the city and county administrations and the Minnesota DNR to reduce the level of nutrients entering the lake, took water clarity readings and pushed a shoreline restoration project on nearby Loon Lake.



While phosphorous levels remain a concern, the primary adversary today, however, is invasive plants, specifically curlyleaf pondweed and Eurasian watermilfoil. “Pondweed showed up in 1988 and the presence of milfoil was first confirmed in 2005,” said the first president and current vice president of the WLA. “In 2012, with funds from the association, city, county and a DNR grant, we did the first herbicide treatment for curlyleaf pondweed—about 30 acres.”



By 2019, though, it became apparent that annual spot treatments of the fast-spreading weed weren't enough, according to Rathmann. More importantly, the public's level of engagement in matters concerning the lake had faded again; the WLA founder was largely working alone.



When a massive bloom of both plant species in 2021 nearly covered Clear Lake with floating mats of vegetation, however, things changed. A small group of individuals stepped up, spurring yet another wave of civic involvement.

#### **2022 Mechanical Harvesting of Curlyleaf Pondweed**

- Dates: 5/24 – 6/20 (15 days of harvesting)
- Equipment. Weed harvester, transport barge, conveyor, two trucks.
- 75 acres +/- harvested = 5 acre/day average
- 230 tons (460,000 lbs) of CLPW removed (certified scale at Solid Waste Facility)
- 36 tandem dumptruck loads = 1.69 tons/load average
- Cost = TBD



**Weed Harvester**



**Transport Barge Unloading**

“Duane had dedicated more than 20 years of his life to the WLA and to improving lake quality, and he was getting little support from the community,” said Trevor Kanewischer, Waseca County Chief Deputy and current WLA president. “That had to change.”

He, along with his brother Aaron, friends Steve Kiesler and Larry Krause, and County Commissioner Blair Nelson offered Rathmann their help, and a board of directors was reestablished along with Doreen Eaton-Borchert and Jill Stagman getting involved.

With the lake overwhelmed by weeds, the group proposed that mechanical harvesting would be the most efficient way to reduce the biomass. “And we got lucky on a couple of counts,” said Kanewischer. “One board member, Larry Krause, had contacts that led him to finding a harvesting machine and conveyor that was for sale. Plus, a substantial amount of federal funds earmarked for quality-of-life improvements had recently become available to the county. So, a process that could take two years to complete came together in a couple of weeks.”

In May 2022, under Waseca County’s Public Works Department, the harvester went operational and removed 230 tons of curlyleaf pondweed. Future seasonal harvesting, timed to occur before the plants can produce seeds in early summer, will eventually allow native plants to reestablish.

The reinvigorated association also sought assistance from county water resource specialist Haley Byron who was helpful with critical funding, and DNR area AIS Specialist Carli Wagner who helped secure a DNR grant to fund a milfoil eradication program. “We treated the entire lake with a low dose of fluridone,” said Rathmann. “Waseca County was one of 12 grant recipients selected statewide, and the only one in southern Minnesota.”

A 3 to 5 parts-per-billion concentration of the herbicide maintained over 90 days, he explained, kills milfoil without harming native plants or animals. “We’ll do a late-season plant survey and another in the spring to see exactly what we’ve got,” he continued, “but so far it looks to have done well; we had no emergent weeds at all this year.”

Clear Lake once again making a comeback is good news for everyone who



enjoys the lake; even better though is that the recent actions of a few have sparked a renewed energy among community members.

“The WLA is gaining momentum again,” said Kanewischer. “Membership is growing, we’ve established monthly meetings with guest speakers, rallied local donors and formed new partnerships with the city, county and state.

“There is still a lot to do with our current projects, but we’re also looking toward the future and long-range planning. But to be successful, we need even more city and county residents and landowners involved in the effort to preserve one of the county’s most important natural resources and largest county park.”

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