

Stearns County Aquatic Invasive Species Plan

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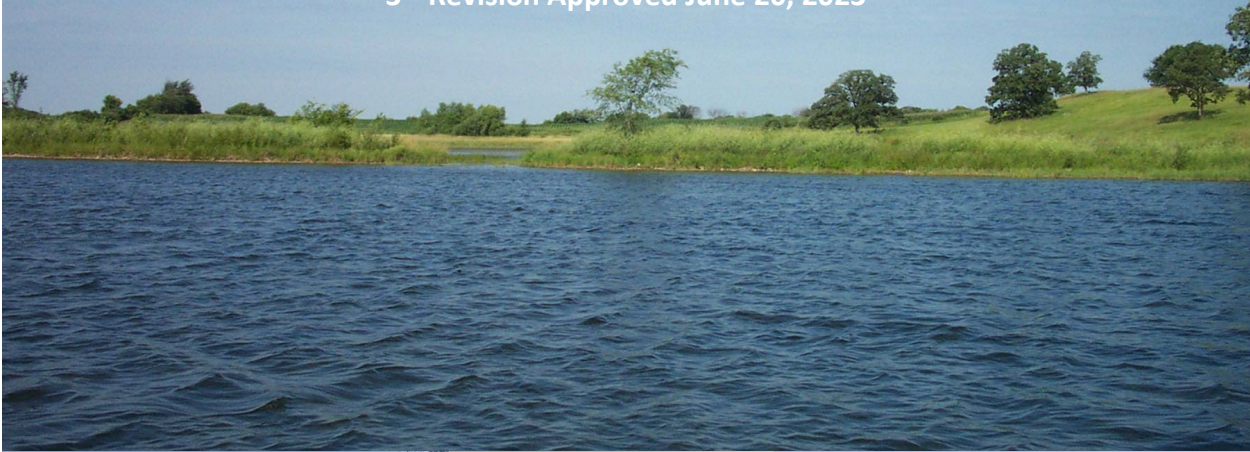


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A. Executive Summary

Minnesota's lakes and rivers are among Stearns County's greatest natural assets. Today, aquatic invasive species (AIS) threaten the quality of aquatic habitats, ecosystem function, and human activities. AIS have the potential to negatively affect the enjoyment of future generations and the quality of these legacy resources in Stearns County and across the State of Minnesota. Many AIS are already present within the State and are being transported into Stearns County. These species are increasing in distribution across the state while other more devastating species not yet here threaten Stearns County as well. The invasion of Starry Stonewort in Stearns County after this plan's inception makes this point clear.

This Plan seeks to prevent and curb the spread of AIS in Stearns County by evaluating the risk of spread and implementing strategies to reduce this risk. The Plan seeks to develop partnerships with other entities working on AIS prevention within the County as the primary means to reduce this risk. The Plan is in place as long as County AIS Prevention Aid from the State of Minnesota is available for implementation.

Incorporating risk reduction strategies available through Minnesota Statute 84D, the AIS Plan addresses the following seven key areas:

1. AIS Program Management

It will be the responsibility of Stearns County Environmental Services Department (ESD) to oversee Plan implementation and management. An AIS Committee made up of stakeholders in AIS prevention has been established to advise and assist ESD on all aspects of Plan implementation and management. Inspection & decontamination activities envisioned in this Plan require a delegation agreement with the MN Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Both Stearns County and the North Fork of the Crow River Watershed District have executed these agreements in the past for their respective work areas, and it is expected these established relationships will continue. Periodic review of the Plan and its initiatives will occur to evaluate for effectiveness and necessary revision.

2. Education and Awareness

The Education and Awareness component of the County AIS Plan will focus on raising awareness of the importance of preventing the spread of AIS. Example projects include (but are not limited to): signage, educational programming (students and adults), lake service provider engagement and promotion of vibrant water-advocacy organizations, such as lake/river associations/coalitions. The Request for Proposal (RFP) process will be utilized to empower partners to carry out these projects.

Responsible parties will be ESD, with assistance from the County AIS Committee, along with partnering entities. Partnering entities include, but are not limited to: lake associations, coalitions of lake associations (COLAs), local citizen groups, and local units of government (e.g., municipalities, townships, conservation districts, lake improvement districts, watershed districts)

3. Inspection/Decontamination

The "inspection" component of the County Plan will utilize the Request for Proposal process to annually establish a Stearns County Watercraft Inspection Program for public accesses in the county. In addition, other entities with existing delegation agreements can also seek funding for inspections.

For "decontamination," focus will be on supporting partners that wish to undertake decontamination within the county via the RFP process. This includes thermal, mechanical or other methods.

Responsible parties will be ESD, with assistance from the County AIS Committee, along with partnering entities.

4. Population Assessment and Management

AIS population assessment and management programs will utilize the RFP process. Focus will be given to funding management efforts for waters with isolated infestations that can yield big results in control and thereby decrease risk of AIS spread, and/or gathering baseline data to assist in risk assessments and implementing responses to discovered AIS infestations.

Responsible parties will be ESD, with assistance from the County AIS Committee, along with partnering entities.

5. AIS Response Plan & Contingency Reserve

A Stearns County AIS response plan was developed for new, possibly treatable, AIS infestations. Lake Associations are encouraged to individualize the county's plan for their own use. The County's AIS response plan addresses an invasive species "incident," an isolated infestation not yet established in a particular water resource (ex. whole lake or river system), rather than an established invasive species "issue."

In addition, a contingency reserve will be established to provide a dedicated funding source for any water body in the county that experiences an above-mentioned "incident." ESD, with assistance from the County AIS Committee, will be responsible for managing this reserve per the guidelines established in this plan. ESD, with assistance from the County AIS Committee, will also be responsible for the response plan. Partnering entities, with assistance from Stearns COLA and DNR, are responsible for any individual plans.

6. Enforcement

A plan may be developed to increase enforcement capacity in the County by utilization of licensed peace officers across the County. ESD, with the assistance of the County AIS Committee, is responsible for determining the feasibility of this strategy.

7. Risk Reduction Opportunities

The plan includes several ideas that can potentially reduce the overall risk of AIS spread within the County. ESD, with assistance from the County AIS Committee, will be responsible for progressing these opportunities as warranted.

Plan implementation calls for three on-going committees: 1) the county AIS Committee, which advises and assists ESD on various aspects of Plan implementation and management, 2) the AIS RFP Evaluation Subcommittee, responsible for reviewing and ranking AIS Prevention Aid funding proposal from non-county entities for activities to prevent and curb the spread of AIS in the county, and 3) the AIS RFP Award Panel, responsible for assuring proposal ranking has been completed fairly, following ranking criteria contained in the Plan without conflicts of interest, and finalizing the award decisions. Allocation of state-provided AIS Prevention Aid is primarily managed through the RFP process.

The complete program is overseen by ESD.

B. Purpose of Plan

The Stearns County AIS Plan seeks to prevent and curb the spread of AIS in Stearns County by evaluating the risk of spread and implementing strategies to reduce this risk. The Plan seeks to develop partnerships with other entities working on AIS prevention within the County as the primary means to reduce this risk. The Plan is in place as long as County AIS Prevention Aid from the State of Minnesota is available for implementation. The Plan will undergo a periodic review for applicability and modified to reflect current law, scientific thinking, and current practices to be as effective as possible.

1. Importance

Our lakes and rivers are among Stearns County's greatest natural assets. Today, AIS threaten the quality of these legacy resources in Stearns County and across the State of Minnesota – they threaten the quality of aquatic habitats, ecosystem function, and human activities such as recreation. These species are increasing in distribution across the state while others not yet here are approaching quickly and threaten Stearns County as well as the state. The invasion of Starry Stonewort in Stearns County after this plan's inception makes this point clear. Preventing and limiting the spread of these aquatic invaders is critical to the future of the County's water resources, which contribute to part of the state's annual \$16 billion-plus tourism industry (see <https://mn.gov/tourism-industry/>).

Implementing this plan is a major step to prevent and curb the spread of AIS across the County. Without State funding the County, LGUs, or Lake Associations may not have a chance to work on this devastating issue. The County Plan will assist in the coordinating of activities, sharing of experiences, and building of awareness at all levels. State funding allows all counties to develop plans that can be coordinated across counties, and the state. Plans don't have to be the same, but similarities will exist since the AIS toolbox provided by the DNR in the legislative laws is limited. However, this approach has been successful in the Western United States as described in the Background section in *History of AIS in Western States*. (Appendix D)

2. Economic Impacts

The potential economic impacts to Stearns County, other local governments, and county citizens, are not precisely known. However, there does exist a body of research quantifying economic and social impacts from invasive species that can serve as a reasonable surrogate. As an example, the US Department of Agriculture's National Invasive Species Information Center has a collection of research articles on this topics, found here: <https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/subject/economic-and-social-impacts>.

In addition, the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center has undertaken research projects to evaluate the effects of AIS on property values, as well as to quantify and analyze socio-economic impacts of AIS on both ecosystem services and Minnesota tourism. Learn more here: <https://www.maisrc.umn.edu/>.

Finally, the programs in the western states have provided data via Uniform Minimum Protocols and Standards for Watercraft Interception Programs for Dreissenid Mussels in the Western United States (UMPS II) showing that the cost of prevention is far lower than the cost of dealing with infestation after it occurs.

Not only is there cost savings to be achieved utilizing prevention activities as a means to reduce the risk of new AIS infestation (and the normally-higher costs associate with managing said infestations), but any delay in the established of an aquatic invasive provides time for scientific advances to occur. These advances may help to prevent an infestation, more effectively control an infestation, or perhaps even result in eradicating an infestation. The wealth that Minnesota's lakes, rivers, and wetlands generate,

through various ecological services as well as property tax base for multiple local governments, justifies considerable investment in their protection by preventing the further spread of AIS.

3. Environmental impacts – Ecosystem Changes

Some confusion exists outside the scientific community as to the impact of AIS on the ecosystem of a lake or a river. Invasive species are a major threat to our environment because they can (1) change habitats and alter ecosystem function and ecosystem services (including food-web disruptions), (2) crowd out or replace native species, (3) damage human activities, costing the economy millions of dollars, (4) degrade water quality, and (5) introduce pathogens. Invasive species rank second in causes of habitat destruction worldwide. (Wilcove et al. 1998) and are a threat to biodiversity. Almost half of the species in the United States that are at risk of extinction are endangered because of the effects from introduced species alone or because of their impacts combined. In the case of zebra mussels, they have an incredibly rapid reproductive growth rate and no known natural predators in North America. And because mussels can attach to each other when they settle, large clusters occur in small areas. As many as 700,000 zebra mussels have been found in only one square yard of surface area on boats, pilings, and pipes. Zebra mussels are efficient at filtering large volumes of water; adult may filter more than four quarts a day. This filtration process, which can improve water clarity, disrupts lake ecology, potentially leading to explosive vegetation growth and significant alteration of food-web makeup and dynamics. In some cases, this appears to provide an improvement in fish habitat, but only for the short term. Habitat may increase, but the massive growth of the zebra mussel population can deplete the food sources of native fish, ultimately impacting the ecosystem by actually reducing the fish population. This is even more devastating if the increase in vegetative growth is another invasive like Eurasian watermilfoil. Eurasian watermilfoil out-competes natural vegetation. It has a longer growing cycle and can take over large areas of a lake with impassable mats of vegetation. Hydrilla is more aggressive and grows to greater depths, encompassing more of the lake. Some shallow lakes can become completely filled with invasives. Starry Stonewort, first found in Minnesota within Stearns County, forms dense mats and can eliminate native species from an area. To date, no known eradication of these invasive species exists.

C. Background

1. Definition of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS)

According to Minnesota Statute 84d an Aquatic Invasive Species, “. . . is a plant or animal, including algae and submerged, floating leafed, or emergent plants, that naturally grow in water, saturated soils, or seasonally saturated soils that is a non-native species that invades water beyond their natural and historic range that:

- (1) causes or may cause economic or environmental harm or harm to human health; or
- (2) threatens or may threaten natural resources or the use of natural resources in the state.”

2. Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Aid, first payable in 2014

On May 20th, 2014 the State of Minnesota Legislature authorized a new annual funding stream of \$10 million in County Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Aid to stop the spread of plants and animals like zebra mussels, Eurasian watermilfoil and others in Minnesota, contained in MN Statute 477A.19. [Chapter 308, HF3167: Omnibus tax bill. Article 1: Property Tax Aids and Credits, Section 11] (Appendix B). This new funding is apportioned between the counties using a formula combining the number of public boat access sites and the number of watercraft trailer parking spots in each county. The proceeds from this aid must be used solely to prevent or limit the spread of non-native, aquatic invasive species at all access sites within the county.

Stearns County’s share of the funding is approximately \$250,000 per year.

The county must establish, by resolution (Appendix C) or through adoption of a plan, guidelines for the use of the proceeds. The guidelines set by the county may include, but are not limited to: providing for site-level management, countywide awareness, and other procedures that the county finds necessary to achieve compliance, as detailed in MN Statute 477A.19 Subd. 3.

3. History of AIS in Western States

A document referenced in the MN Statute 84d is the “Uniform Minimum Protocols and Standards for Watercraft Interception Programs for Dreissenid Mussels in the Western United States (UMPS II)” prepared for the Western Regional Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species” (Appendix D). UMPSII was used as a reference document for the MN Statute 84d and the Stearns County AIS Plan and will be used as a reference for the action steps in this Plan. The reference document gives a great deal of the history of the invasive mussels, coupled with the science of preventive AIS activities used in the western states. It was conceived following the discovery of invasive mussels in the western United States in 2007 and their subsequent detection in river reservoirs, connected waterways, and aqueduct systems. Many water and resource management agencies and organizations in the western U.S. initiated watercraft interception programs to prevent the further expansion of invasive mussels. Nearly all of the agencies and organizations employing interception (inspection) programs have relied on the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission’s (PSMFC) Watercraft Inspection Training (WIT) program (certified by the 100th Meridian Initiative) for their training and for the initial development of policies, practices, protocols and standards used to establish those programs.

Many watercraft interception programs in the western United States have also adopted and implemented the protocols and standards recommended by the earlier version of this document (Zook and Phillips 2009). As a result, there are many similarities between watercraft interception programs currently being implemented in the western U.S. However, variations in programs still exist due to the widely varying capacity of individual agencies and organizations responsible for protecting local water resources.

The Western Regional Panel (WRP) of the national Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force (ANSTF), their member agencies and most organizations currently involved in watercraft interception programs in the

West have recognized the need for better coordination and more consistency in the application of programs used to prevent the overland transport of invasive mussels and other AIS on trailered watercraft, seaplanes and water-based equipment.

The WRP updated the original document in 2009. It summarizes current strategies to address the invasion of invasive mussels in the West, and identifies and prioritizes the specific actions that are needed to comprehensively prevent the further spread of these mussels, respond to new infestations, and manage existing infestations. To address the growing mussel problem “Continue the Development of Effective Watercraft Inspection and Decontamination Protocols and Standards” was listed as one of its “highest priority actions.”

4. Stearns County Data on Lake and River Resources

On the DNR’s public waters inventory, the County has over 500 lakes and wetlands, and many miles of rivers and streams. 42 of these lakes have at least one public access in Stearns County; other have connections to said accesses (ex. Augusta Lake connected to Clearwater Lake). The Mississippi River has 7 public accesses; Sauk River has 14. Waterbodies on the County border may have other public accesses (ex. Big Birch Lake – Todd County).

Public access is a location on a waterbody designated for the purpose of launching water-related craft (such as boats, paddle boards, etc.) and is open to the public for use.

The table below provides detail on public accesses in the county. In addition, there are approximately 26 known private and/or resort-owned accesses in the county. Refer to appendix E for the most current map of public accesses in Stearns County from DNR.

Table 1: Public Access Administrators in Stearns County

Administrator	Trailered Watercraft Access	Carry-In Access	Notes
DNR	35 (34*)	2	Several accesses have 2 ramps
Township or City	16 (14*)	10	
Stearns County Parks	4	6	One trailer site has 2 ramps
Wright County Parks	1	0	
TOTALS	56 (53*)	18	
*DNR Public Water Access list denotes 53 trailered watercraft accesses in Stearns County. Difference due to the DNR access “Koronis – Hwy 55” is listed in Meeker County by DNR and two township sites are not on the DNR list.			

The importance of the lakes and rivers in Stearns County should not be underestimated. 16.3% of Stearns County’s Total Property Market Value, excluding the city of St. Cloud, is comprised of lake shore properties (\$2.8 billion), per the Stearns County Assessor’s Office as of June 2023. Tourism is an important business in the County, largely because of the various lakes and waterways.

Private funds in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per year are spent in Stearns County to prevent and manage AIS. The funding provided through this Prevention Aid will augment that amount and greatly protect these assets.

Refer to appendix F for a list of local government units involved with AIS prevention in Stearns County.

5. AIS Programs in Stearns County Prior to Stearns AIS Plan

On the DNR's Public Waters Inventory, Stearns County has over 500 lakes and wetland, and many miles of rivers and streams. Around 40 lakes have Lake Associations. Prior to the receipt of Local AIS Funding, sixteen of these Associations had some level of an AIS program that can include boat inspections and/or handing out AIS educational brochures. Eight of these Associations had private inspectors or official DNR inspections. Eight Associations were doing some level of AIS treatment. Thirteen Associations distribute AIS educational brochures to members and transient boaters at the boat access. In 2014, DNR grants described in sections below were awarded to Big Birch, Big Fish, Koronis, and Little Birch Lakes. Several lakes also had private inspection programs, designated by DNR as Ambassadors or Volunteers. These were Sauk River Chain of Lakes, Big Watab Lake, and Pearl Lake. The inspection programs on Lake Koronis and Rice Lake employed DNR Level 1 inspectors managed through the North Fork of the Crow River Watershed District (NFCRWD).

6. Information about AIS and AIS presence in Stearns County

The key Aquatic Invasive Species that the Stearns County AIS Plan is designed to prevent are Eurasian watermilfoil, Starry stonewort, hydrilla, zebra mussels, and quagga mussels, although other AIS are also considered. Eurasian watermilfoil and Zebra mussels are known to infest several lakes and rivers in the County. Hydrilla and quagga mussels are not yet known to be in Minnesota, but both have been found in Wisconsin and both have demonstrated that they are more economically and environmentally devastating than the ones presently invading Stearns County. Starry stonewort forms dense mats on the bottom sediment and can grow to the surface from these dense mats in 8 – 12 feet of water. This invasive interferes with the usability of the lake for several user groups.

Risk analysis of sources of AIS infestations into the County indicates that the likely routes are via transient boats going from lake to lake and the movement of water-related equipment, such as through the sale of used docks and boat lifts moving from lake to lake without adequate out of water time. The Stearns County AIS Plan focuses on these sources in an attempt to reduce the risk associated with these practices.

The Minnesota DNR maintains a statewide list of waterbodies infested with AIS, which can be found here: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/infested.html>. Curly leaf pondweed is also present in many lakes in Stearns County and throughout the state. Because of the high prevalence of this invasive, it is no longer tracked as an invasive species by DNR. Below is a map of current AIS infestations in Stearns County, sans Curly leaf pondweed.

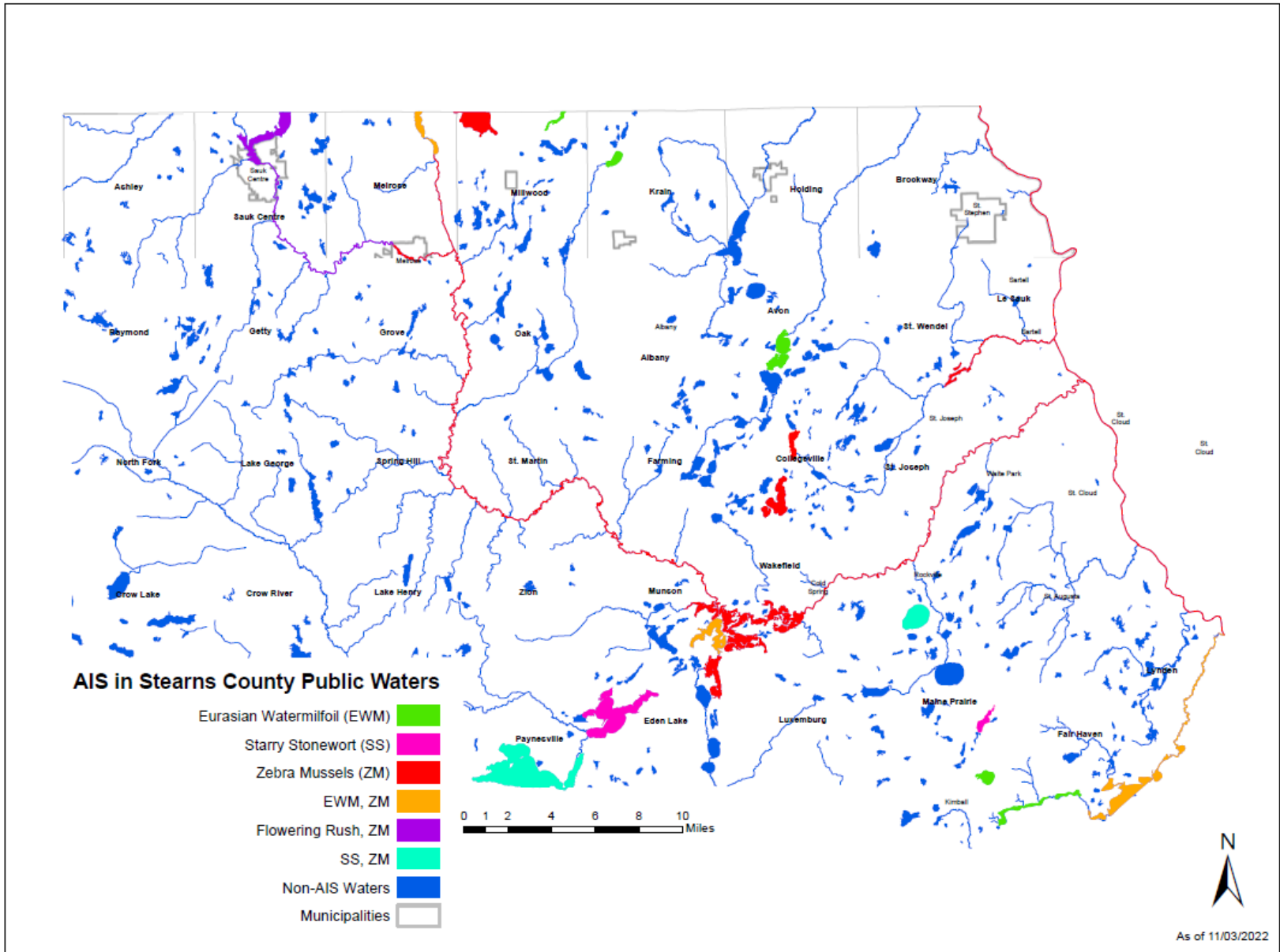


Figure 1: Map of AIS in Stearns County Public Waters

D. Responsibility for Plan Execution

Stearns County Environmental Services Department (ESD) oversees plan implementation and management. This is accomplished through the County's AIS program. Principle duties include (but are not limited to):

- Consider alignment of activities with outside partners such as other counties or the State of Minnesota.
- Coordinate all activities under the County's AIS program, ensuring all activities follow the County AIS Plan.
- Develop RFP process and language, including eligibility requirements for received proposals.
- Implement, or delegate, an annual budget for all County AIS program activities.
- Implement Plan activities not applicable to the RFP Process.
- Maintain Plan alignment with current scientific knowledge and laws.
- Make decisions on any questions of County AIS Plan language interpretation.
- Decide eligibility of submitted proposals for funding eligibility from partnering entities.
- Review and accept reports from previously-funded proposals under the RFP Process.

All duties are to fit within the confine of this Plan. ESD can use funds available to the County through the enacting legislation to achieve Plan strategies that are broader in scope and not part of the RFP process. ESD can also seek to work with stakeholders to influence changes in laws and government unit actions where these changes would further the goals of the Plan.

1. RFP Process

The Stearns County AIS Plan utilizes a Request for Proposals (RFP) process as a fair and impartial means to distribute state-provided AIS Prevention Aid (Appendix G). Proposers will have an opportunity to present their proposals to the RFP Evaluation Subcommittee, which will rank the funding applications and recommend an award amount to the AIS Award Panel.

What follows is a list of requirements to be used by ESD in administering the RFP process:

- ESD, with assistance from the AIS Committee, can deviate from example RFP language contained in Appendix G, as long as said deviations do not go beyond the confines of this Plan.
- If funds remain at the end of the RFP evaluation process in a plan strategy category, said funds can be shifted to another plan strategy category, even if said shifting would result in going beyond the percent ranges listed in this plan. The ESD working with the Awards Panel, has authority to re-align awards and/or the applicable budget as deemed appropriate.
- New proposals for individual waterbodies received after the RFP deadline has passed will not be accepted.
 - Requests for funding from the Plan's contingency reserve are an exception and will be accepted at any time. A request for contingency reserve funding will be heard by the AIS Committee before a final decision by the ESD.
- No additional funds for a calendar year, other than requests for funding from the contingency reserve, will be awarded after the RFP process is finished.
- If a recipient wants to make an adjustment of an existing funding award, the recipient must make a change request to ESD. The change request will be heard by the AIS Committee.
 - Any change to an existing award must be within the same program category as the award, e.g. inspection or management.

2. Committees

To advise and assist with these duties, the following committees were formed, three of which remain active today.

a) AIS Task Force

The purpose of the AIS Task Force was to prepare and write the initial Stearns County Aquatic Invasive Species Plan. The Stearns County AIS Plan was submitted for approval to the County Board of Commissioners in 2015. This Task Force was also charged with the development of the RFP and RFP evaluation criteria. The Task Force was comprised of 20 stakeholders representing many different usages of the public waters of the County. The Task Force was disbanded upon Plan adoption. The names of the stakeholders and who they represented are listed below.

Table 2: AIS Task Force Members (disbanded)

<u>Name</u>	<u>Representing</u>
Kevin Farnum	Lake Koronis Association
Tommy Weber	Pirz Lake Association
Dick Johnson	Stearns Coalition Of Lake Associations
Adam Hjelm	Sauk River Watershed District
Chris Lundeen	North Fork Crow River Watershed District
Tara Ostendorf	NFCRWD (alternate)
Cole Loewen	Clearwater River Watershed District
Peter Rutherford	Big Birch Lake Association
Lee Moening	BBLA (alternate)
Jim Sand	Big Fish Lake Association
Mark or Joan Strobel	Big Watab Lake Association
Scott Palmer	Grand Lake Improvement District
Don Weirens	Little Birch Lake Association
Barb Lang	Pelican Lake Association of St. Anna
Stephanie Johnson	Water business (Water Guards)
Paul Bugbee	Resort owners (Bugbee Hive)
Kyle Jochman & Jeff Torgerson	Service provider (InTune Motor Sports)
Renee Eckerly	Cities & Fishing tournaments
Stephen Saupe	Townships
Joe Lang	Sportsmen's Clubs
Advisors:	
Sue McGuire	Stearns County Environmental Services
Chelle Benson	Stearns County Environmental Services
Ben Anderson	Stearns County Parks Department
Greg Berg	Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District
Evan Freeman	MN Department of Natural Resources
Tina Wolbers	MN Department of Natural Resource
Christine Jurek	MN Department of Natural Resource

b) AIS Committee

The AIS Committee was formed shortly after disbanding of the AIS Task Force. The AIS Committee advises and assists ESD on all aspects of Plan implementation and management, including those duties listed above.

Membership of the AIS Committee is to entail existing stakeholders within the county interested in preventing the spread of AIS. Stakeholders include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- Lake Associations and/or Coalitions of Lake Associations.
- Municipalities, Townships, Lake Improvement Districts, Watershed Districts.
- Sportsman Clubs, Fishing Leagues, Professional Fisherpersons.
- Business Interests, such as: lake service providers, marinas and dealers, engineering firms, inspection service firms, lake vegetation surveyors and applicators.
- Trade Organizations.
- University and College Faculty and/or Staff; Professional Scientists.
- DNR staff specializing in AIS (said member(s) are non-voting).
- Citizens-at-large (must be a resident of Stearns County).

To ensure effective function, the AIS Committee will implement the following:

- A chair and vice-chair will be elected annually by the Committee members.
- Members are to declare what entity they represent, if they are not a citizen-at-large. Entities can only have one representative on the Committee.
- Members are to attend at least 50% of all Committee meetings in a calendar year.
- Members are to read through meeting materials prior to said meetings and are to actively engage in discussions.
- Members are to maintain an open mind, be willing to learn, work to control any potential bias, be respectful of other member and be willing to take on work assignments outside the committee meeting.
- Voting will be done by members in attendance at the meeting when a call for a vote takes place.
- Whenever a member(s) has a financial interest in any matter under consideration by either ESD or the AIS Committee, said member(s) shall ensure:
 - The interest of said member(s) is fully disclosed to ESD and the AIS Committee.
 - Said member(s) abstains from voting on any such matter before the AIS Committee.

“Interest” is defined as any financial interest a member may have in a matter under consideration. Examples include any business enterprises known by the member to be licensed by or to be doing business with the County which said member or member’s immediate family is connected as an employee, officer, owner, investor, creditor of, director, trustee, partner, advisor or consultant.

If a member(s) having a financial interest in any such matter is in question, the AIS Committee may determine said interest by vote. ESD will have the final say in determining whether a member has a financial interest on any such matter when in question but will take any such vote by the AIS Committee under consideration.

ESD decides whether an entity or an individual can serve on the AIS Committee, and whether an entity or individual should no longer serve on the AIS Committee. Other matters related to AIS Committee function are to be addressed by ESD in consultation with the AIS Committee on an as-needed basis, including but not limited to quorum, rules or order, conflict resolution and meeting schedule.

c) AIS RFP Evaluation Subcommittee

The Stearns County AIS Plan utilizes a Request for Proposals (RFP) process as a fair and impartial means to distribute funding (Appendix G). In order to meet those requirements, an RFP Evaluation Committee will be formed annually as a sub-committee of the AIS Committee. This subcommittee is responsible for reviewing and ranking AIS Prevention Aid funding proposals for activities to prevent and curb the spread of AIS in the county. Members of this subcommittee must be knowledgeable about (1) AIS laws; (2) AIS activities across the state; (3) the Stearns County AIS Plan; and/or (4) current scientific knowledge. Committee members cannot be associated/employed with the DNR. This subcommittee will use those criteria contained in Appendix G to rank the proposals and recommend funding amounts to the AIS Award Panel.

d) AIS RFP Award Panel

The AIS Award Panel is made up of 3-5 individuals, recommended by ESD and appointed by the County Board, to assist in the financial distribution of the county's AIS money. The goal is to have at least one member from within the natural resource profession. The purpose of the Award Panel is to assure the award decisions follow the RFP criteria contained in the Plan and that there is no conflict of interest by RFP Evaluation Subcommittee members in their funding recommendations to the AIS Award Panel. The Panel will assure that the Evaluation Subcommittee has completed the ranking of requests with the RFP criteria. The Panel should make every effort to attend the Evaluation Subcommittee discussions to gain first-hand knowledge of the requests and, following the evaluation subcommittee's recommendation, convene their panel to agree or disagree with those recommendations.

E. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) AIS Programs

DNR's management of AIS has four component programs. They are:

1. Legislation relating to AIS control in Minnesota
2. DNR Grants that allow the legislation to be implemented
3. Education
4. Personal Responsibility

1. Legislation relating to AIS control in Minnesota

As the AIS problem has begun to gain a level of importance in the State of Minnesota, the legislature responded with the creation of Minnesota Statute 84d. In 2009 "A Minnesota State Management Plan for Invasive Species" was created – this document served as a key reference for developing this plan (copy found in appendices). The state has a revised version of this plan here:

<https://www.mninvasives.org/stateplan>. In 2012 the legislature passed the Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Legislation (Appendix B).

Minnesota Statute 84D directed the DNR to develop a state AIS Plan (Appendix H) and a set of tools to be used to prevent and curb the spread of AIS in the state. The tools are (1) a set of laws regarding the transfer/carrying of AIS; (2) an education program; (3) a boat/trailer inspection program; and (4) a boat/trailer decontamination program. These tools can be used by non-DNR employees when authority has been granted through an (authority) delegation agreement with DNR. The Stearns County AIS Plan uses these tools to achieve its goals.

2. DNR Grants (See MN DNR website www.dnr.state.mn.us)

The DNR provides grants for a suite of AIS prevention and control activities. Learn more here:

https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/aquatic_invasive/index.html.

3. Education

The DNR AIS budget for FY 2016 was \$9. 910 million, which was 1% of their overall budget. The primary focus of the DNR over the last several years in regards to AIS prevention has been education of the public, using access signage, brochures, and billboards. In spite of this targeted education effort, compliance with invasive species regulations at Enforcement check stations decreased from 86% in 2015 to 82% in 2016. (See references DNR report) The DNR continues to focus on education, although locally collected survey evidence at lake inspection points, such as 2013 Lake Koronis data, indicate that less than 1% of persons launching their boats are not aware of the AIS laws. DNR Parks and Trails Division controls all signage at DNR accesses. The Stearns County AIS Plan will focus on those areas of education where current DNR programs which are lacking. The MN DNR website contains available educational materials, as well as links to other entities producing educational materials. Refer to the reference section for links to DNR webpages containing this information.

4. Personal Responsibility

DNR's AIS Management Program has relied on people taking personal responsibility to follow the laws of the state as it comes to the prevention of the spread of AIS. As the number of lakes infested continues to increase, it is apparent to the writers of this plan that relying on this strategy, along with the education, enforcement, and inspection efforts currently in place is not working. This was recognized by the Minnesota Legislature when they passed the Aquatic Invasive Species Prevention Aid Legislation. Personal responsibility only works when people are willing to follow the law and understand the consequences both personally and environmentally. The lack of a compelling reason to follow the law and the very low dollar value of fines also does not encourage compliance. This is a problem recognized by the DNRs AIS Advisory Committee, as noted in their 2013 Annual report available on the DNR website here: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/aisadvisory/reports.html>.

F. Stearns County AIS Plan Goals and Strategies

The Stearns County AIS Plan envisions a future where the spread of AIS is effectively controlled, where effective management reduces the presence of established AIS populations and where lake associations, government entities and the public are informed and engaged on AIS issues and AIS prevention. To accomplish this vision, the following goals are established.

- AIS not currently found in Stearns County waters do not become established.
- AIS established in Stearns County waters do not expand further to other Stearns County waters and/or waters of the state.
- Existing AIS infestations are managed to minimize disruption to the ecology and recreational use of Stearns County waters.
- Stearns County citizens understand AIS issues and support efforts to prevent AIS spread.
- Shoreland owners, lake service providers and public/private water access users implement best practices to reduce the spread of AIS.

Both the strategies to accomplish the above goals, as enumerated below, and the goals themselves, will be evaluated on a regular basis using current scientific and research-based knowledge, as well as the current condition of AIS in the county. Doing so assures plan implementation remains rooted in these goals and delivers on measurable objectives.

1. Oversee plan implementation and management via the County AIS program.
2. Use the Request for Proposal (RFP) process to prioritize and support projects responding to the greatest threat of serious lake degradation from AIS infestations, or the spread of AIS to other waters.
3. Encourage the public and lake service providers on implementing best practices when servicing water-related equipment (ex. watercraft, docks, lifts, rafts) to reduce the risk of AIS spread.
4. Work with partners (ex. lake associations, community groups, schools, COLAs, other government units) to provide for the distribution of AIS educational/outreach materials (ex. brochures, booklets, studies, bulletins) to improve awareness and education of their audiences on AIS prevention.
5. Seek to provide AIS education and support to owners of private riparian resorts/condominiums/trailer parks, and/or owners of private accesses (ex. signage, booklets, bulletins).
6. Emphasize and advocate watercraft (and water-related equipment) inspections and decontaminations as a major deterrent to the spread of AIS.
7. Contract with third party inspection providers who provide DNR-level 1 inspectors (not AIS Volunteer Ambassadors) and encourage both technical and social engagement training for said inspectors.
8. Encourage partners to perform lake vegetation surveys as baseline data and perform AIS surveys on a regular basis.
9. Encourage partners to manage existing AIS infestations to 1) minimize disruption to the ecology and recreational use of infested waters, and 2) reduce the risk of spread to other waters.
10. Maintain a response plan for the county and/or partners to use to respond to discovered AIS infestations.
11. Maintain a contingency reserve to 1) respond to newly discovered AIS infestations, or 2) undertake a unique AIS prevention opportunity.
12. Encourage local law enforcement to both provide opportunities for their personnel to attend DNR AIS training and to enforce AIS violations.
13. Communicate with others (ex. DNR, MAISRC, MNCOLA) to review successful AIS prevention, management or pilot programs that can be adapted and utilized to address Stearns County AIS issues.

14. Develop a cooperative relationship with DNR Parks & Trails to understand their plans and goals and jointly work together to make AIS-related improvements at DNR access sites.

The Stearns County AIS Plan seeks to prevent and curb the spread of AIS in Stearns County by evaluating the risk of spread and proposing strategies to reduce this risk. The Plan seeks to develop partnerships with other entities working on AIS prevention within the County as the primary means to reduce this risk. The Plan is in place as long as County AIS Prevention Aid from the State of Minnesota is available for implementation. The Plan will undergo a periodic review for applicability and modified to reflect current law, scientific thinking, and current practices to be as effective as possible.

Partnering entities include, but are not limited to: lake associations, coalitions of lake associations (COLAs), local citizen groups, and local units of government (e.g., municipalities, townships, conservation districts, lake improvement districts, watershed districts)

Refer to County AIS Program annual reports available on the county's website for review of progress on plan goals.

G. Stearns County AIS Program Categories

1. AIS Program Administration

AIS Program Administration is expected to require 5% of the budgeted dollars supplied by the Legislature to Stearns County for AIS prevention. As noted in section D, Stearns County Environmental Services Department (ESD) oversees plan implementation and management. Refer to appendix A for a list of strategies and actions under this area.

Delegation Agreement Strategy

In 1992, the DNR Watercraft Inspection Program was created to prevent and curb AIS spread through boater education, watercraft inspections and watercraft decontaminations at public water accesses. By law, the DNR may enter into inspection authority delegation agreements with tribal or local governments. Employees working for those organizations would then be operating under the authority of the DNR to perform inspections and decontaminations. More information on inspector authorities and the inspection program can be found here: https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/watercraft_inspect/index.html. This means that if the LGU hires a consultant agency to administer an inspection program, the employees of the agency who are working on behalf of the LGU are also operating under DNR authority. The authority passes through. This allows a county, city, township, watershed, LID, or another LGU to sign a delegation agreement and to subsequently hire either a private workforce/staffing organization or a coordinator to manage an inspection/decontamination program. The inspectors would be able to operate as Level 1 or level 2 inspectors depending on their training.

Since 2016 Stearns County has entered into a delegation agreement with the DNR allowing the county to hire a staffing organization to hire staff and manage an inspection program with qualified inspectors.

2. Education and Awareness

Education and awareness strategies will be used in order to raise awareness of the importance of preventing the spread of AIS. Public involvement, support, and cooperation in AIS prevention is necessary to achieve the goals of this plan. Focus will be targeted to areas that appear to need increased emphasis. Examples projects include (but are not limited to): AIS signage, educational programming (students and adults), lake service provider engagement, promotion of vibrant water-advocacy organizations, such as lake/river associations/coalitions. The RFP process will be utilized. The Education and Awareness effort is expected to require 5 - 15% of the budgeted dollars. Refer to appendix A for a list of strategies and actions under this area.

3. Inspection and Decontamination

Inspection and decontamination are two of the primary tools available to prevent and curb the spread of AIS in our County lakes and rivers. It is imperative that both deliver consistent results, i.e. inspections and decontaminations that are thorough and complete per DNR requirements. The RFP process will be utilized to annually establish the Stearns County Watercraft Inspection Program for public accesses in the county. In addition, other entities with existing delegation agreements can also seek funding for inspections. For “decontamination,” focus will be on supporting partners that wish to undertake decontamination within the county via the RFP process. This includes thermal, mechanical or other methods.

Inspection/Decontamination is expected to require 60 - 70% of the budgeted dollars supplied by the Legislature to Stearns County for AIS prevention. Refer to appendix A for a list of strategies and actions under this area. Partners can purchase inspection services via the county’s delegation agreement by direct contract with the county, to be developed by ESD.

Inspection

All the inspectors in the Stearns AIS program receive the required DNR training and passed the competency exam. Random checks of the work being done by the inspectors may occur, and the inspectors receive supervision from the contracted service provider. With trained, competent inspectors, the inspection program is one of the key tools available in stopping the spread of AIS.

Decontamination

In the case of thermal decontamination three components are required to deliver a successful decontamination: (1) control of the decontamination equipment to deliver proper temperatures; (2) proper use of the equipment to allow enough time for the temperature to perform its desired outcome (kill), along with physical removal of AIS; and (3) the training of the inspector to know where to decontaminate. As with inspection, these three components are under the control of trained personnel. Other decontamination methods are available and can be pursued under this plan.

4. Population Assessment and Management

The RFP process will be utilized to empower partners to carry out these projects. Management is defined as activities to control AIS (ex. herbicide treatments, biological treatments, mechanical or hand-harvesting, etc.) and must be for the purpose of AIS prevention, not to provide riparian access to a waterbody. Assessment is defined as activities to 1) establish the location and amount of an AIS infestation in a waterbody, 2) perform early AIS detection monitoring, as defined in Stearns County's Response Plan for AIS (found on the county AIS webpage), or 3) perform studies of aquatic vegetation and/or animal communities to serve as baseline data. Focus will be given to funding management efforts for waters with isolated infestations that can yield big results in control and decrease risk of AIS spread, and/or gathering baseline data to assist in risk assessments and implementing responses to discovered AIS infestations. It is expected that 10 – 20% of the budget for the county funding will be considered to support this effort. Refer to appendix A for a list of strategies and actions under this area.

5. AIS Response Plan & Contingency Reserve

The earlier an AIS infestation is discovered, the greater the potential for a response plan to be effective. This is why baseline lake data is important. To support this, a Stearns County AIS response plan, using the *2013 Minnesota Rapid Response Plan for Aquatic Invasive Species* (copy found in appendices), was developed for the county and is available for public use on the county website. The DNR has a recent version of the response plan here: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/programs.html>. Individual lake associations, watershed district, lake improvement districts and other entities can use this document to tailor a response plan for their lake. The County Response Plan is intended to address an invasive species "incident," rather than an invasive species "issue." An incident is an isolated infestation of an AIS not yet established in a particular water resource (ex. whole lake or river system), whereas an issue is where a particular AIS has established itself in the particular water resource. The County's plan is aligned with the MN DNR plan. (Appendix I)

This plan establishes a contingency reserve with a cap of \$20,000. The purpose of this reserve is to provide funds to respond to an above-mentioned "incident." However, other uses of the reserve are allowed, provided the following requirements are met:

- The reserve cannot be used for established AIS issues.
- The reserve is not to be used for events or opportunities that should fall under the RFP process, regardless of missed timing of process. ESD, with assistance from the AIS Committee, makes the final decision on whether a proposed event or opportunity should follow the RFP process.

- If an event or opportunity is not a response to an above-mentioned “incident,” said event/ opportunity cannot receive more than \$5,000 from this reserve.
- Other than a response to an above-mentioned “incident,” the event or opportunity should provide a county-wide benefit.
- The event or opportunity may be a partnership opportunity.
- ESD, with assistance from the AIS Committee, makes the final decision on whether reserve funds are used for any proposed event or opportunity.

\$20,000 was determined to be a reasonable balance given the desire to have funds available to respond to an incident, but not to encumber funds that could be used for other AIS prevention activities. Annually, funds can be allocated to help maintain this reserve’s balance, from 0-3% of that year’s budget. Refer to appendix A for a list of strategies and actions under this area.

6. Enforcement

According to the DNR’s 2021 Invasive Species Annual Report, while compliance with invasive species regulations has increased every year since the first year of check stations in 2012, for 2020-2021 the DNR notes this may also be due to DNR Enforcement Division dedicating less hours to AIS efforts due to completing work priorities and the loss of AIS check stations in 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An increase in enforcement capacity is warranted within the County to assist the DNR and provide compelling reasons for following AIS laws. Annually, funds can be allocated to assist with enforcement activities, from 0-5% of that year’s budget. Refer to appendix A for a list of strategies and actions under this area.

7. Risk Reduction Opportunities

Refer to appendix A for a list of strategies and actions under this area. The plan includes several ideas that that can potentially reduce the overall risk of AIS spread within the County. No budget is assigned to this area. It will be determined by ESD, with assistance from the AIS Committee, on how to proceed and fund these preventive measures or pilot projects.

H. Stearns County AIS Plan Budget

Stearns County Environmental Services will be the fiscal agent for the county funds available for implementing and managing the Stearns County AIS Plan, including AIS Prevention Aid. Annual budgets are set by ESD within the confines contained in this Plan. During the annual RFP process, if it is found that the received proposals present a skewed distribution from the budget ranges contained in this Plan, ESD, working with the Award Panel, has authority to re-align awards and/or the applicable budget as deemed appropriate. (Appendix J)

References:

1. URL for USDA's National Invasive Species Information Center, "Economic and Social Impacts:" <https://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/subject/economic-and-social-impacts>.
2. URL for MN AIS Research Center. <https://maisrc.umn.edu/>.
3. Wilcove, David S., David Rothstein, Jason Dubow, et al. "Quantifying Threats to Imperiled Species in the United States." *BioScience* 48, no. 8 (1998): 607–615.
4. Zook, William J. and Stephen H. Phillips. 2009. Recommended Uniform Minimum Protocols and Standards for Watercraft Interception Programs for Dreissenid Mussels in the Western United States (Prepared for the Western Regional Panel). Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, Portland, Oregon. 53 pp.
5. DNR URLs:
 - a. AIS Grants: https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/grants/aquatic_invasive/index.html.
 - b. AIS Outreach: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/outreach.html>.
 - c. AIS Programs, Reports, Partners: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/programs.html>.
 - d. AIS Signs: https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/prevention/ais_signs.html.
 - e. Infested Waters List: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/infested.html>.
 - f. Local AIS Prevention Aid: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/ais/prevention/index.html>.
 - g. News: <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/news/index.html>.
 - h. Watercraft Inspection Program: https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/watercraft_inspect/index.html.
6. Invasive Species Program. 2013. Invasive Species of Aquatic Plants and Wild Animals in Minnesota: Annual Report for 2013. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, St. Paul, MN. <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/aisadvisory/reports.html>.