

Mille Lacs water quality improvements start with individual landowners



Mille Lacs is synonymous with fishing. A new program focuses on preserving the lake's water quality. **Photo Credit:** Harmony Maslowski

Waves build for 20 miles before they pound Mille Lacs' northeast corner, where Barbara and Michael Macioch own 120 feet of sandy shoreline and a retirement home near Malmo.



The Maciochs have done what they can to curb runoff and minimize erosion since they moved in 19 years ago.

They've tended a bank-stabilizing line of trees. They've let deep-rooted sedges replace grass. Planted shrubs. Reduced mowing.

Lakeshore property owners like

the Maciochs, who encourage neighbors to take the long view, play a pivotal role in a three-year, three-county, \$337,750 pilot program meant to preserve Mille Lacs' water quality. With a coordinator hired and money for lake-friendly landscaping available, the Compass program is poised to intensify outreach efforts this spring.

"The purpose of (the) program is to protect the water quality of the lake. A very close second is building community around the lake," said Jason Weirnerman, Waite Park-based Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources conservationist.

That's where Harmony Maslowski comes in. Her job – Mille Lacs



Maslowski

Soil & Water Conservation District watershed coordinator – includes leading the Compass program.

The Mille Lacs Lake Water Management Group, which formed in 1997 to manage the surrounding water resources, developed Compass to support and promote lakeshore property owners' active role in protecting the lake.

Through their involvement with that group, the Maciochs have promoted stewardship among neighbors. Michael has served as

chairman. Barbara has routinely distributed information to 40 friends.

“Just because we live on the lake, we feel we owe something back to the lake,” said Michael, 74. A retired 3M photographic research specialist, he and Barbara, 78, a retired 3M secretary, moved here to be close to family and fishing.

“It’s really imperative that this treasure, or this feature that we are living next to, that we protect it,” Barbara Macioch said.

Participation is voluntary. It starts with an SWCD technician and landowner touring the property together. The technician notes practices already in place and presents a list of potential improvements to each landowner.

Compass efforts might include managing runoff by installing rain barrels or planting native species to filter runoff, stabilize the shoreline and minimize erosion.

In-kind and landowner contributions will match BWSR’s \$268,750 Clean Water Fund grant. Mille Lacs, Aitkin and Crow Wing county SWCD technicians provide landowners with free lake stewardship plans. Grant funds may pay up to 75 percent of project costs.

“All of those little projects make the big picture. Every person that you can get to put up a rain barrel or let a buffer grow or plant some trees or shrubs on their lawn – every one person that does that can influence another person,” said Lynn Gallice. A longtime conservation technician with Mille Lacs SWCD, she helped develop the Compass program, and



Building community is one way the Compass program aims to get neighbors involved in preserving Mille Lacs’ water quality. Photo Credit: Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe DNR

has led walk-overs with property owners.

“It’s better to keep the lake healthy than to try to restore it after it’s lost its health,” said Janet Smude, the longtime Aitkin SWCD technician and former watershed coordinator who initially handled Compass finances for the three counties.

Compass was developed as a tiered recognition program. Signs would indicate levels of involvement – bronze, silver and gold – and people willing to help others.

Landowners loved the consultations and the free lake stewardship plans aligned with water-quality goals. They didn’t want to post signs or be featured in news articles. A revised outreach effort is under way.

“The focus is organizing active citizens and trying to inspire people to have that active role in improving and protecting the watershed,” Maslowski said. “What we’re

hoping is eventually there will be the ability for it to spread along the watershed.”

Mille Lacs’ size poses one challenge. At 132,500 acres – more than 200 square miles – it’s Minnesota’s second-largest inland lake.

Mille Lacs 2,878 lakeshore properties generated \$5.1 million in tax capacity within the three counties in 2017. Their estimated market value exceeded \$672.6 million. The 60 miles of highway encircling Mille Lacs passes Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe tribal land, other year-round and seasonal residents, and resorts and businesses.

The Compass program strives to highlight individual landowners’ roles in lake health.

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, meanwhile, started water sampling in the early 1990s. Its long-term monitoring study began in 2005. Samples collected monthly, June through September, from 16 points are tested for chlorophyll-a, clarity and total phosphorus.

“We always keep our finger on the pulse of the lake,” said Perry Bunting, director of environmental programs for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Department of Natural Resources.

“This is the Mille Lacs Band’s homeland,” Bunting said. “Being good stewards ... that’s just part of their nature.”

If the Compass program takes hold and more property owners take the long view, in 10 years the shoreline could have a more natural look.