



Targeted SSTS Inspections: Keeping Lakes Clean in Cook County

April 2014 Snapshots

Cook County is known by many as the gateway to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, a pristine treasure of natural resources. The reputation is well-earned, as demonstrated by the thousands of people who visit the area on an annual basis. Minimizing developmental impact on those resources is a priority, and Cook County and the Cook County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) are working hard to keep the lakes, rivers and streams that crisscross the land in top shape. As part of that work and consistent with the Cook County Water Plan, the county has identified septic inspections as a priority.



The lakes of Cook County are a popular destination, and maintaining their water quality is a priority.

In a region where 91% of the land is public, the privately-held development is heavily clustered around shoreland areas. Using funding from a CWF grant, the SWCD has partnered with the Cook County Planning and Zoning Department to target three lakes, Tom Lake, Greenwood Lake, and McFarland Lake, where development pressure is high, for Subsurface Sewage Treatment System (SSTS) inspections. Monitoring data has shown two of those lakes, Tom and Greenwood, have a declining water quality trend. Without these funds, SSTS inspections wouldn't occur unless there was new construction or voluntary upgrades.

Based on the results of the inspection program, the risk to these lakes is very real. For example, at Tom Lake 76% of the systems were found to be non-compliant and at Greenwood Lake that number hit 70%, with ten systems deemed imminent public health threats. Inspections on McFarland Lake are currently in process. Thanks to these inventories, the county has been able to proactively address these water quality threats and protect the lakes and the people who live on them. The Lake Superior North Watershed has waters that are a destination for people around the country, a resource for Minnesota and beyond, and keeping those waters healthy matters. Inspection programs like this one are making a positive impact on regional water quality now and for the future.

It's a community effort, Cook County SWCD Water Plan Coordinator Ilena Berg says. "We are very lucky to have really committed citizens and lake associations who have been very engaged in this process. Between their efforts and the work of the Planning and Zoning Department, we're working toward a goal of 100% compliance on all our lakes." Next on tap for the program: inspections on properties along Lake Superior, the largest freshwater lake by volume in North America.