

# Questions & Answers: *Pelican Lake Enhancement Project*

## **Q: What is the Pelican Lake Enhancement Project?**

**A:** The Minnesota DNR is working with Ducks Unlimited and other partners to improve water quality, enhance waterfowl habitat and provide public hunting opportunities in and around Pelican Lake, which has suffered from rising water levels.

## **Q: Is the DNR going to drain Pelican Lake?**

**A:** No. The agency plans to draw down water levels in the lake in three phases. The first phase will draw the lake down from its current level of 954.5 feet above sea level to the ordinary high water level (OHW) of 952.2 feet. The second phase will draw the lake down another 1.5 feet to the lake's new long-term water level. Phase three will lower the lake to 944 feet in a temporary management drawdown lasting a maximum of three years. These drawdowns will help re-establish the aquatic vegetation that provides food and habitat for ducks and other wildlife.

## **Q: When will a drawdown occur?**

**A:** Timing of any drawdowns will depend on several factors, including the acquisition of property interests needed for the outflow from willing landowners. It's expected that the first phase of the drawdown will begin by 2014, preferably after a winterkill.

## **Q: What will happen to the lake's fishery?**

**A:** Pelican Lake will continue to have a fishery, but it likely will be more in line with historical conditions than recent trends.

Pelican's fishery historically has been characterized by a "boom and bust" cycle common for shallow basins that experience regular winterkill.

Because of rising water levels and relatively mild winters in recent years, the lake has not experienced a significant winterkill since 2001. Such conditions often result in a slow downturn in quantity and quality of game fish species. There is some evidence that this is happening now.

Planned drawdowns will result in the lake returning to historical cycles. DNR wildlife staff will continue to work with their colleagues in the Section of Fisheries to maintain a fishery that complements improved wildlife habitat.

## **Q: Why was Pelican Lake chosen for a waterfowl habitat improvement project?**

**A:** Pelican Lake is one of only 45 designated wildlife lakes in Minnesota. That designation gives DNR authority to manage water levels in a way that primarily benefits wildlife habitat. The lake's location within about an hour's drive of the state's population center in the Twin Cities also makes it highly valuable for the quality waterfowl hunting opportunities it can provide. By comparison, about 5,400 lakes in the state are actively managed for fisheries.



## **Q: Why is DNR spending time improving waterfowl habitat when it seems the flyway has shifted west?**

**A:** Waterfowl migration patterns fluctuate due to known and unknown factors. Pelican Lake remains in the core flyway for diver duck species, like lesser scaup, ringnecks, redheads, and canvasbacks. Minnesota's tremendous water resources have always been failsafe habitats for waterfowl during severe droughts across the plains. And much of the Pelican Lake

Enhancement Project is aimed at water quality improvement.



Ross Hier

## **Pelican Lake Enhancement Project**

Once a mecca for ducks and hunters, Wright County's Pelican Lake in recent decades has seen its value as waterfowl habitat and a hunter's paradise decline due to rising water levels and worsening water quality.

Now a coalition of state and federal agencies, along with Ducks Unlimited, local government and landowners are working together to bring back Pelican Lake's glory days. By acquiring riparian property, enhancing habitat on private lands and establishing a good outlet for the lake, they expect to create better hunting opportunities, restore waterfowl habitat and improve water quality.



# Project aims to restore Pelican Lake's legacy as waterfowl magnet

The Minnesota DNR has been working with Ducks Unlimited and other partners to develop plans for restoring Pelican Lake's legacy as a destination for ducks and hunters. Their plans include three main components.

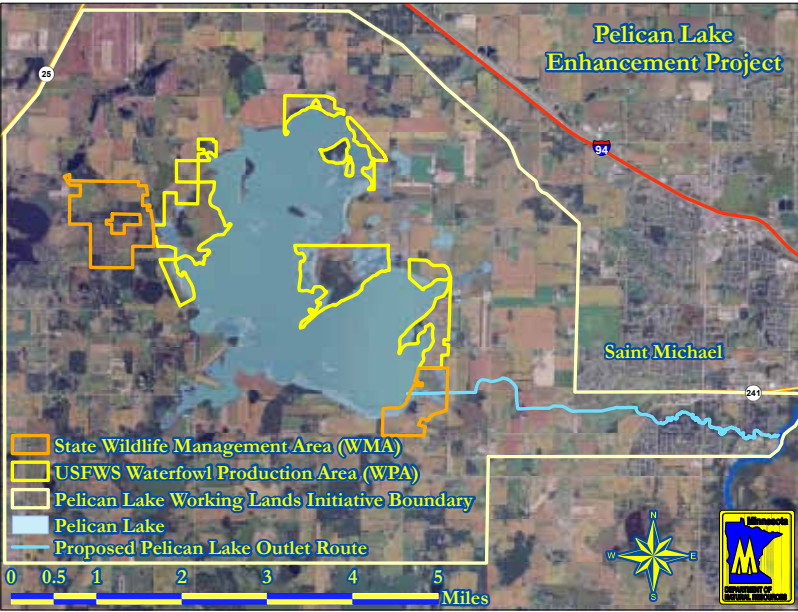
## Acquiring riparian land

Over the past 18 years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has acquired nearly 1,300 acres of land around Pelican Lake for Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs). The Minnesota DNR has purchased 683 acres and established the Pelican Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Both WPAs and WMAs are managed for wildlife habitat and they are open to public hunting. Further acquisitions are anticipated from willing landowners.

## Working with private landowners

Acquisition of riparian parcels is an important component of improving the water quality and wildlife habitat of Pelican Lake. But most of the lake's 13,000-acre watershed will always remain privately owned. With that in mind, DNR has been working with the Wright County Soil and Water Conservation District, the USFWS, the state Board of Water and Soil Resources and

federal farm agencies to help private landowners implement grassland and wetland conservation practices on their land. Over the past four years, this Working Lands Initiative has undertaken 40 projects aimed at improving habitat and water quality on about 800 acres of private land, and more are expected depending on budget and willing participants.



## Water level drawdown

Over the past 25 years, water levels in Pelican have risen by close to five feet, drowning out the aquatic vegetation that ducks need during their seasonal migrations. The loss of vegetation allows wind and wave action to stir up more sediment, which decreases the amount of light that can reach plants growing in the water. Ice action rips out shoreland vegetation; bullheads root around and further add to water quality problems. It's a vicious cycle.

To address these problems, DNR plans to construct an outlet on the southeast corner of Pelican Lake and draw down the water level in three steps by way of Regal Creek and the Crow River. The lower water level will allow soils to consolidate and promote the growth of aquatic vegetation needed by ducks for food and habitat. Eventually water will be managed at a level about four feet lower than in the summer of 2011.

Similar drawdowns on other nearby shallow basins, such as Smith Lake near Cokato, have produced a remarkable resurgence in aquatic vegetation and waterfowl abundance.



Jon Schneider

## Shallow lakes critical to waterfowl future

Traveling thousands of miles each way, waterfowl need comfortable accommodations on their spring and fall migratory flights, wetlands and shallow lakes where they can rest and feed and breed. But Minnesota has lost more than 90 percent of its wetlands and native grasslands. As habitat has disappeared, migration patterns have shifted westward over more favorable accommodations in the Dakotas.

The Minnesota DNR and public and private partners are working to assure that waterfowl and waterfowl hunting remain part of our natural heritage. A key component of their strategy focuses on improving conditions on the 1,854 shallow lakes that are either on or next to public land.



## For more information contact:

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[http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/areas/wildlife/pelican\\_lk\\_projectoverview.pdf](http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/areas/wildlife/pelican_lk_projectoverview.pdf)

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