Access to Minnesota waters is important because there are nearly 15,000 lakes and 90,000 miles of streams in the state. Almost 3,000 public access sites are available; about half of these are administered by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the remainder by local and federal agencies.

The decision to install a private boat ramp should be made carefully because the site may be unsuitable and construction expenses and maintenance can be significant. Most private boat ramps serve resorts and campgrounds, and a smaller number are constructed for individual lots where no public access is available. Among the questions to consider for a boat ramp is the following: Is the site suitable for a boat ramp?

Site considerations

Before a boat ramp construction project begins, the potential impacts of destroying aquatic plants (i.e., fish and wildlife habitat) by construction and subsequent traffic should be considered. The bed of the lake or stream at the site should be capable of supporting the boat ramp without the use of pilings, dredging, or other special site preparations including minimal grading. A boat ramp should not be installed in bluff areas or where steep slopes would make the ramp hazardous or difficult to use. Steep slopes, wetlands, and shore impact zones are sensitive areas regulated by local units of government, which may preclude their use for a boat ramp site.

Areas adjacent to swimming beaches or areas used by water skiers should be avoided. Also, wave-prone areas may be subject to erosion or may be unusable during windy conditions. Areas where offshore depths are shallow may be difficult to use during low-water conditions. Finally, the ramp must not obstruct flowing water (rivers) or present a hazard to navigation.

If a private ramp is necessary, a highly desirable solution would be the construction of a single ramp by a group of riparian owners at a jointly agreed location for their common use.

Minnesota’s requirements for boat ramps

In some cases, a DNR permit is needed to install a private or public ramp. An aquatic plant permit may be needed from DNR Fisheries if aquatic plants will be removed. However, a public waters permit is not required from DNR Waters for constructing a boat ramp that meets the criteria listed on the next page. Before initiating any project, contact your DNR Area Hydrologist; see contact information on the back of this sheet. Local units of government and other agencies may require their own permit or a separate permit, or they may not even allow construction of the ramp.
Water Access: Installing a Boat Ramp
August 2008/revised March 2012
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Water Access: Boat Ramps

Private ramps: site and construction criteria

- The site can support a ramp without pilings, dredging, or other special site preparations.
- The ramp will be constructed of gravel, natural rock, steel matting, or other durable inorganic material not exceeding 7 inches in thickness.
- The ramp will be no more than 12 feet wide along shore and 10 feet waterward of the shoreline or into a water depth of 4 feet, whichever is less.
- Excavation of no more than 5 cubic yards (to create a suitable slope and launching area) and placement of no more than 5 cubic yards of crushed rock, gravel, clean sand, or small stone are allowed to provide a stable base or maintain use of the ramp.
- The site is not a federally designated wild and scenic river.

Public ramps: site and construction criteria

- The requirements are the same as above, except the ramp can be up to 36 feet wide and 30 feet waterward of the shoreline or into a water depth of 4 feet, whichever is less.
- No more than 200 cubic yards of excavation is allowed, and placement of no more than 80 cubic yards of crushed rock, gravel, clean sand, or small stone is allowed to provide a stable base or maintain use of the ramp.

If the proposed ramp cannot meet all of the preceding criteria, a permit from the DNR is required. Contact your DNR Area Hydrologist for assistance.

Construction specifications

Construction materials allowable for the installation of ramps include poured concrete, natural rock, precast concrete, gravel, and steel matting. All may require periodic maintenance from vehicle use and lake ice expanding and pushing against the ramp in winter.

The slope of the boat ramp should be steep enough to launch the boat without the vehicle entering the water. Generally, ramp slopes from 15 percent (1.5 feet of drop over a 10-foot length) to 12 percent ensure that boaters will have little trouble launching or pulling their boats from the water. If the slope is steeper than 15 percent, retrieving a boat and trailer is difficult. A slope of less than 12 percent will also cause a problem; the flatter the slope, the farther a vehicle must back into the water so that a boat can float free of its trailer.

DNR Contact Information

DNR Ecological and Water Resources website and a listing of Area Hydrologists: http://mndnr.gov/waters
DNR Ecological and Water Resources
500 Lafayette Road, Box 32
St. Paul, MN 55155
(651) 259-5100

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