Minnesota DNR AIS Advisory Committee

April 23rd, 2026, Final Meeting Minutes

Hybrid Meeting via DNR Sauk Rapids Office

Members Present: Shelly Binsfeld, Andrew Dickhart, Beto Garcia, Liz Kaltenhauser, Byron Karns (new), Jared Langer, Spencer McGrew, Carrie Ohly-Cusack (on-line), Sami Selter (new), Amanda Weberg, Raining White

Members Absent: Nick Bluhm, Patrick Selter, M. Mahmood Tajbakhsh, Doris Loe (new)

Ex-officio Members Present: Maddie Hayden (online)

Ex-officio Members Absent: Amy McGovern

DNR Staff Present: Rafael Contreras-Rangel, Grace Henrich (online), Doug Jensen (online), Kelly Pennington, Scott Staples (online)

Guest Speaker: Jake Walsh, MAISRC (online)

Chair **A. Weberg** called meeting to order at 10:02 am

Motion to approve Agenda: S. McGrew, motion, **B. Gracia**, seconded, agenda approved

Motion to approve February Minutes: B. Garcia, motion**, L. Kaltenhauser**, seconded, minutes approved

Meeting Summary

Committee discussed the following:

- Action Items from March meeting, including the state of the county survey, the status of SAISAC's website, and leadership transition and membership for 2027
- AIS and water quality and policy
- Formation of a Legislative Ad Hoc Subcommittee and learned what the Minnesota Lakes and Rivers Advocates have planned
- Learned about connections between AIS and water quality impacts

Action Items

- **Action Item:** Check if Hennepin County filled out the updated version of the survey
- **Action Item:** Determine term end dates for current members and consider posting them on the website
- **Action Item:** Check member eligibility if they move to WI during their term
- **Action Item: D. Jensen** will try to reach N. Bluhm via phone regarding his interest in continuing to be a committee member (he declined)
- **Action Item: K. Pennington** will look into getting a description for what is eligible for AIS funding for Community Grants
- **Action Item:** DNR staff will look into including survey metrics into Annual Report
- **Action Item:** Travel reimbursement form shared was from 2024, **R. Contrares-Rangel** will check on current reimbursement rate and share current one (completed)

- **Action Item: M. Hayden** will reserve conference space for in-person meeting October 29 on the U of MN St. Paul campus (completed)

Revisit Action Items from March Meeting

State of county survey

- Continued efforts to increase county participation; several counties remain unresponsive despite outreach
- Additional outreach planned: **A. Weberg** will continue contacting non-responding counties and will follow up by phone as needed; **A. Dickhart** will support these efforts
- Provided an overview of the survey for new members, emphasizing its purpose in understanding county plans related to the 50% Prevention Aid reduction in 2027
- Discussion on potential follow-up actions, including future correspondence and use of results during the next legislative session
- SAISAC previously submitted a letter to the DNR Commissioner regarding the aid reduction; survey results will support a formal report and presentation
- Recognition of the survey committee's work given the complexity of the process
- **Action Item:** Check if Hennepin County filled out the updated version of the survey
- **A. Dickhart** will submit an abstract to UMISC to present findings (completed)
- Noted feedback from counties regarding ranking questions where activities are not applicable; improvement considered for future iterations
- Current response rate is approximately 53%; 70% identified as an excellent benchmark
- Discussion whether a minimum response threshold is needed before analysis with interest in sharing results prior to summer to inform legislative candidates
- Shared example outreach process used by SAISAC (multiple emails followed by phone calls) as a potential model
- Emphasized importance of securing responses from counties most affected by potential funding impacts
- **A. Weberg** will continue outreach until May 8, when the survey will close
- Considered but ultimately decided against completing surveys by phone on behalf of counties; preference remains for counties to submit their own responses
- Clarified that the survey is intended for county managers; some counties may rely on task forces rather than a single point of contact

Status of SAISAC website

- **D. Jensen** submitted requested updates to the site
- Recommended to improve tracking of meeting attendance to ensure quorum

Goals for fall 2026 meetings

Deferred due to time limitations.

Leadership transition and membership in 2027

- **Action Item:** Determine term end dates for current members and consider posting them on the website
- Anticipated leadership transition follows previous practice: Jared would assume chair responsibilities; a new vice-chair will be needed

- **Action Item:** Check member eligibility if they move to WI during their term
- Discussion focuses on need to retain core members to help orientate new members. Consensus is that this committee is in very good shape, perhaps the best that it ever has. Dialogue has improved over the last three years, members are asking great questions like learning what DNR's role is in this committee. This is largely due because members really want to be a part of what the committee does. Recruitment for new members for 2027 will be needed to replace those who will serve out their terms in December
- Member **N. Bluhm** has been contacted via email three times regarding meeting absence resulting in no response. **Action Item: D. Jensen** will try to reach him by phone (update: he declined)

AIS and Water Quality or Policy

Jake Walsh, MAISRC

Discussion

- **K. Pennington** reports that Reane Loiselle-Kasun, a DNR fellow, has been analyzing data on curly-leaf pondweed (CLPW) and found no evidence that CLP improves water quality; a future presentation of her results may be possible
    - **S. Binsfeld** asks how DNR plans to use this information for CLPW management and grant decisions
    - **K. Pennington** note this is still to be determined, but the study is already informing internal understanding
    - **S. Binsfeld** suggests using communications staff to share such findings with the public in accessible formats
    - **A. Weberg** adds that this could connect well with the land steward program
- **B. Garcia** expresses concern about messaging that might imply AIS provide beneficial ecological services, noting that impacts vary by lake and could lead to public misunderstanding
    - **D. Jensen** notes past misconceptions that zebra mussels improve water quality, which were later disproven
    - **S. McGrew** shares that a new Lake Improvement District was formed to address CLPW, and positive messaging could undermine its perceived need
    - **S. McGrew** also highlights permit trends: approximately 500 aquatic invasive plant permits issued compared to 10,000 aquatic plant management permits, indicating substantial removal of healthy vegetation
        - **J. Walsh** adds that many plant-removal permits are under one acre but often involve intensive removal for property access
    - **S. Binsfeld** agrees with **B. Garcia's** concerns and emphasized the importance of AIS Specialists' work in interpreting data to inform permit decisions
- **B. Karns** askes about seed sources for native plants
    - **A. Weberg** notes this topic was discussed in a recent DNR workshop.
- **B. Garcia** asks about metrics used to evaluate water quality.\
    - Discussion highlights that definitions and metrics vary widely, and a more consistent, clearly defined approach is needed
    - Members note that expanding the metrics could help capture additional ecological factors

- **A. Dickhart** requests clarification on how the 15 lakes were selected for the common carp water-quality study
    - Some lakes had concurrent management activities that may have influenced outcomes
- **S. Binsfeld** asks whether metrics beyond phosphorus were used
    - **J. Walsh** confirms that biomass removed was also documented
    - **S. Binsfeld** references studies in Sherburne County showing post-management reductions in carp, noting that some data can be noisy and results should be interpreted carefully
- **D. Jensen** asks about carp impacts on dissolved oxygen
    - **J. Walsh** answers that dissolved oxygen has not yet been evaluated in relation to carp impacts
- **J. Walsh** notes that many "rules of thumb" about ecological quality remain untested, and ongoing work is needed to validate them

Sub-Committee Formation and Processes

Legislative Ad hoc Sub-Committee Initiation (S. McGrew, S. Selter)

- Legislators will be on break this summer, it is when lake associations are most active; we need as many touch points in reaching them as possible
- Data is needed and translated through county AIS coordinators and show how the Local AIS Prevention is impactful to the people who live here; people love the AIS Prevention Aid Snapshot Report
- **S. Selter** says MLRA has been fund raising, about $20,000 from a handful of counties, video series is part of three month campaign which will build toward the Aquatic Invaders IV Summit in 2027, more information available via MLRA website (https://mnlakesandrivers.org/summit27/)
    - Videos focus on education and storytelling; content on how the prevention aid funding is benefiting communities is being shared with media outlets
- **Q:** How can counties support this effort? **A:** MNLA has a database of contacts statewide to help people directly connect with updates, contacting local media helps
- **Q:** What types of data from the counties would be helpful? Would getting stories and testimonials from lake associations help? **A:** Yes! MLRA uses a news service that amplifies news to broader local news networks resulting in local pick-ups resulting in 1.5 M impressions (exposures); local AIS Prevention Aid funding helped to influence local staff to pursue advanced education and positions in natural resources
- Via chat: If anyone is able to financially support MLRA, please consider becoming an individual member, MLRA is doing important work for AIS prevention
- Comments regarding value, capacity, and recruitment: Many county hired watercraft inspectors are seniors, who value their work - they are working to protect their lakes for their grandchildren, they tell people in the community about the value of their efforts while younger staff appreciate the opportunity to help serve the State, many have started their careers starting as watercraft inspectors
- Last year, 910 watercraft inspectors with counties conducted 90% of inspections statewide. **Q:** What is a major barrier for joining MLRA? **A:** Awareness, knowing who they are and what they do – making that connection, MLRA helps lake associations become 501c(3)s and organizes coalition of lake associations

- Images of impacts on water quality are very impactful
- Recent research by MAISRC and data analysis (by Steve Henry) that shows that prevention is work has been very helpful
- Members are reminded that at UMISC 2024, plenary speakers, Kirsti Marohn and Dudley Edmonson, emphasized the need for storytelling to help make messages impactful
- During UMISC 2026, plenary speaker Melinda Myers will speak about her use of storytelling regarding gardening and invasive species
- Discussion that images which portray impacts and desired actions are most impactful, not the famous bearded boat from Michigan, not the zebra mussel encrusted boat propellor from Missouri - those types of images do not have as much impact
- Discussion that issues related to AIS center around environmental, recreational and economic values, effective outreach and communications should touch on each of these value systems to help ensure impacts
- **Q:** Where are the annual snapshot reports available? **A:** DNR Prevention Aid website, another longer report under development for 2025 summarizes highlighted accomplishments and success stories from the counties that submit their metrics report - this is where those stories and pictures are shared, developing this report should be made a priority
- Discussion turns to connections between AIS and water quality. **Q:** Why have they been separated? **A:** We have known that there are connections, but they have not studied very much - there are lots of anecdotes, teasing out water quality impacts is complex
- Members view an AIS video from Ottertail County focused on positive messaging
- **Q:** Has MLRA seen an increase in membership since cuts to the Local Prevention Aid were announced? **A:** No, but more lake associations have been supporting MNLA's campaign
- Misinformation about connections of the cuts to Local AIS Prevention Aid and DNR's Invasive Species Program need to continue to be clarified, cuts to funding will not impact DNR's Program, however, it will impact DNR's relationship in being able to coordinate efforts with AIS county coordinators, staff, and watercraft inspection programs - MLRA can help with this
- Members express need to clarify that the increase in watercraft registration surcharge and community grants are not intended to backfill the cut to Local AIS Prevention Aid funding to counties – concern is the perception that boat licenses have doubled and there are half as many watercraft inspectors than there has been in the past – this increase in surcharge has been in the works for years
- Increase in surcharge will not increase DNR's watercraft inspection, it will help fix the structural budget deficit and hiring three DNR staff to help with permitting
- Comment: How much counties spend on watercraft inspection varies, 25-90% depending upon how much funding they receive
- **Q:** Is the Invasive Species Program directly involved with the new Community Grants Program? **A:** No, but have been consulted, members express need to clarify that the Community Grants Program funding is from LCCMR and not connected to DNR's Invasive Species Program and the surcharge increase
- **Q:** Could this be spelled out where application information is provided? This information needs to be provided to county boards - help SWCDs connect with county boards on this issue because currently the Community Grants website describes what is eligible for funding, but not for AIS

Action Item: Kelly Pennington will look into getting a description for what is eligible for AIS funding

- Members suggest that Angelique Dahlberg be invited to meet with committee after the summer break

DNR Updates, Member and Ex-Officio Member Updates

K. Pennington, MN DNR Invasive Species Program Supervisor

- New funding has allowed for new specialist positions to be filled in Region 3, they will help issue permits, which bring the total specialists to 10 statewide
- Communication position located in Central Office will work statewide, which will fill a position 10 years ago, who will help organize outreach capacity, prioritize outreach at public events including State Fair, take a lead role with the Annual Report and build capacity of social media, which is funded by the increase in surcharge; having dedicated staff over CCMI interns will help with overall capacity
- SAISAC letter influenced DNR to hire this communication position, give shout out in Annual Report
- Suggestion to include survey metrics in Annual Report. **Action Item:** DNR staff will look into this
- DNR policy bill was heard in the House which includes: 1) dead and eviscerated invasive carp (bighead, silver, grass) regarding changes in prohibition, 2) invasive carp tagging to inform control, 3) allowing use of common carp as bait, and 4) reporting of black carp required – current status of bill is unknown

D. Jensen and R. Contreras-Rangel, MN DNR AIS Prevention Planners

- Held 2 in-person off-season local AIS workshops in Chanhassen and Brainerd attended by 39 and 24 people and 10 and 11 non-DNR organizations represented, respectively.
- **D. Jensen** gave three guest presentations on "A Compelling Story of AIS Prevention in Minnesota" at a Minnesota Invasive Species Advisory Committee meeting, Dakota County, and Duluth Downtown Rotary which totaled 100 educated
- **R. Contreras-Rangel** says goldfish video will be completed soon

G. Henricks, MN DNR CSMI Intern

- Completed transcripts of off-season workshops and will be posted soon
- Creating a video on zebra mussel sniffing dogs, will share when completed
- Via chat: Goldfish campaign posts will go live May, July and September!

S. Staples, MN DNR Law Enforcement

- Getting ready for open water season
- 2 new K-9s are in training and should be ready in 1.5 months

A. Weberg, Cook County AIS Coordinator, Chair/Member

- Upcoming Voyageur Brewery event in collaboration with Cook County AIS Team to debut a new mystery snail inspired ale beer (snail ale) on June 20 in Grand Marais

B. Karns, WICOLA President, New Member (submitted via email)

ABC –

- CD3 Demo Days, May 2 & 8 @ the Ely Trailhead Visitor Center to show how to use the unit, general AIS outreach and organizational recognition
- Pilot Lead Organizer Training (through MN Lakes and Rivers & how they operate)
- Grants written by MLRA (LCCMR/Boreal Waters/Sportsman for BWCA to begin standing up outreach capacity)
- Asked to help with next year's AIS Summit in St. Paul

White Iron Chain of Lakes Association (WICOLA) has a WQ/AIS Prevention emphasis –

- Buying water quality equipment (2 sondes)
- Taking WQ Data on three lakes, May-Sept
- Collecting Community Science WQ for MPCA 6 streams and 3 lakes biweekly, May-Sept
- Surveys or passive sampling for ZMs, SWF, crayfish
- Acquiring info to understand feasibility to standup eDNA program for AIS suite
- Determine, purchase, maintain (database/store) and deliver AIS handout materials
- Staff events: colleges, fishing tournaments, Blueberry/Harvest fest, Ely, Association meetings
- With MLR, standing up Lake Steward Program (emphases invasives/WQ)
- Bait Bins - Lake County AIS Grant paid for bait bin deposal program; pperated by North SL County SWCD; however, reduced grant ($8 to $5k) would have eliminated landings, so I and another board member adopted two landings for weekly cleaning/maintenance

Contractor with the UMN and volunteer with NPS/USACOE –

- Survey of Namekagon River (part of St. Croix NSR) of native mussel mussels (4wks) Spoiler – New pockets of both abundance/diversity discovered, mystery snails are crazy bad, but zms have not been found (though in watershed lakes)
- LTM of two Essential Habitat Areas on St Croix River (Taylors Falls/Hudson) includes ZMs

M. Hayden, MAISRC, Ex-Officio Member

- Provided an update on the county AIS survey; survey response rate jumped to 82%; direct emails to non-responses are credited with the increased response rate; more respondents are working on it; after the deadline, analyses will begin by the survey committee
- eDNA lab is moving forward and will update the committee as things roll out
- Externship projects begin May 1st, four projects are meant to provide closer connections beyond MAISRC's strategic plan to address local implementation needs including: Eurasian watermilfoil, common carp management, starry stonewort/Chara, eDNA, ID guides, rusty crayfish and mystery snail management action plan created – projects were selected because of the impacts they could have statewide
- **B. Karns** via chat: WICOLA would be very interested in being involved in that crayfish management plan and using eDNA to survey for AIS in these lakes - anyway he can help

Discussion Time for Committee Action Items

Travel expense reimbursement:

- Members are eligible for travel cost reimbursement; members reviewed form; members will need to register to get into the DNR's system; instructions on how to do so were reviewed; once you have an ID, it will be easy to submit reimbursements – contact **R. Contreras-Rangel** if you need assistance
- Members discussed appreciation for meeting in-person and would like to meet more often
- Sauk Rapids is best location to meet but also members expressed appreciation for meeting in-person with DNR and MAISRC staff in conjunction with the MAISRC Showcase (October 28, 2026) – members like meeting in-person in April and October; SAISAC meeting is October 29 on the U of M St. Paul Campus
- Via chat: It would be nice to set in-person meeting in advance
- **Action Item:** Form shared previously was from 2024, **R. Contrares-Rangel** will check on current reimbursement rate and share current one (completed)
- **Action Item: M. Hayden** will reserve conference space for in-person meeting October 29 on the U of MN St. Paul campus (completed)

Announcement:

- Reminder: UMISC 2026, Oct 6-8, 2026, La Crosse, WI, abstract deadline April 15, registration open in mid-May https://www.umisc.net/ (abstract deadline closed, registration now open)

Adjourned 2:59 pm
Next meeting is Thursday, August 27th, 10 am – 3 pm (TBD)