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# 2025 County Shoreland Activities Summary Report

04/06/2026

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## Introduction

All 85 Minnesota counties administering shoreland ordinances are required to complete an annual shoreland activities survey. The survey has been conducted since 1989 and is required to receive the Shoreland Management Grant (part of the Natural Resources Block Grant administered by the MN Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)). The survey data provides an opportunity to:

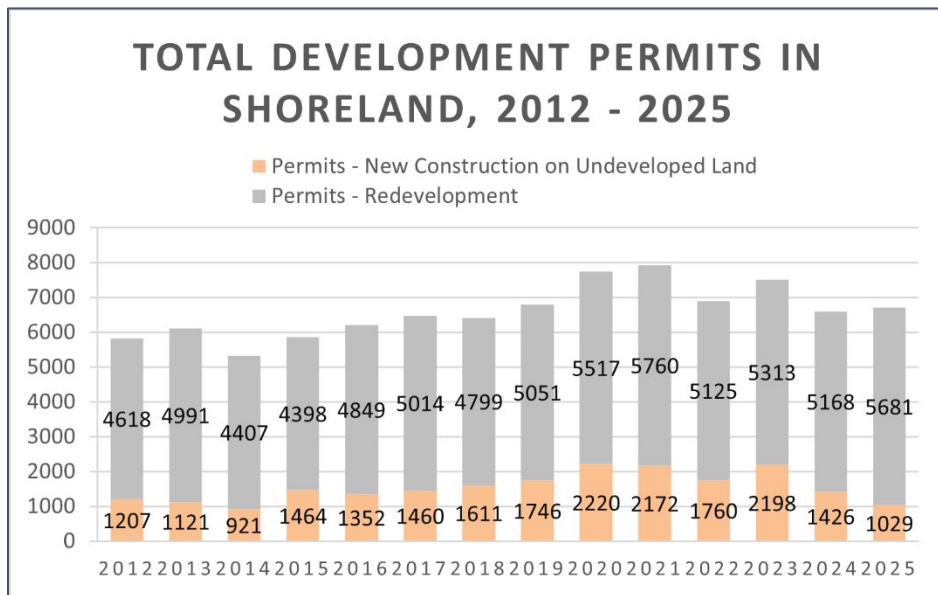
- Track the amount, type, and location of development activity to identify trends and potential threats to shoreland areas.
- Identify administrative challenges, and develop guidance, training, model ordinance language, and other resources to aid administration.

The following is a summary of county shoreline activities during calendar year 2025. All 85 counties completed their shoreland activities survey by March 2026.

## Permits

Counties issued 6,710 construction permits in shoreland in 2025, which is comparable to recent years. Figure 1 shows how permit totals have been changing over the past several years. The data shows that redevelopment typically accounts for about three quarters of the permits issued in shoreland zones.

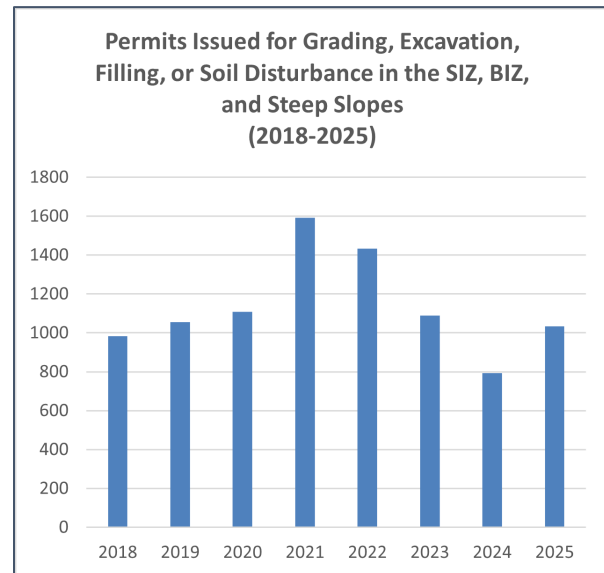
**Figure 1**



Statistics for new development vs. redevelopment were not tracked prior to 2012.

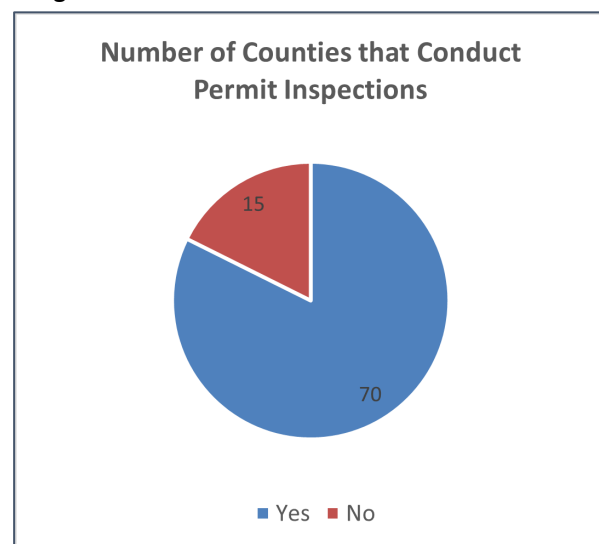
**Permits for Land Alterations.** Counties reported a total of 1034 permits for grading, excavation, filling, or soil disturbance in the Shore Impact Zone (SIZ), Bluff Impact Zone (BIZ), and steep slope areas. The SIZ is 50% of the Ordinary High Water Level (OHWL) structure setback. It is important to manage land alteration in this area, which serves as a buffer to infiltrate and slow runoff, prevent erosion, and provide critical habitat.

**Figure 2**



**Inspections.** Seventy of the eighty five counties (82%) reported that they generally inspect permitted land use applications or building projects in some form or another (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**



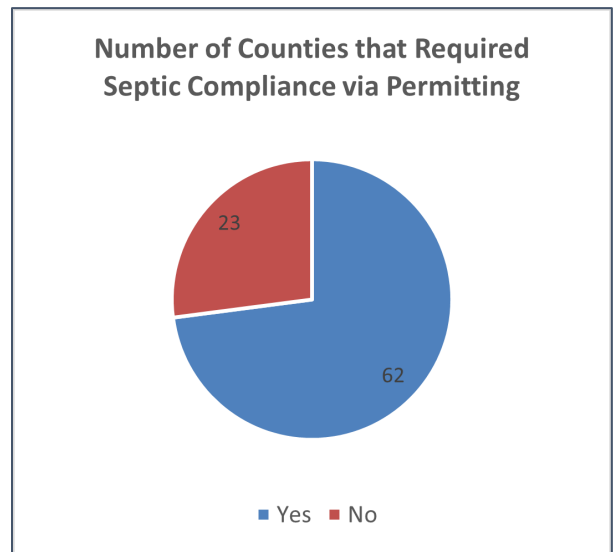
Most counties inspect prior to and after construction, and more than half also inspect during construction. A smaller percentage require “as-built” documentation (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Types of Inspections Conducted**

Method	Percent
On-site, pre-construction	87%
On-site, during construction	54%
On-site, after construction	74%
Require “as-built” documentation	23%

**Septic Compliance.** Sixty-two counties (73%) report that they require septic system compliance inspections or system upgrades whenever a variance or permit of any kind is granted (see Figure 4), as required under the shoreland rules (MN Rule 6120.3400 (Subp.3)(D.)).

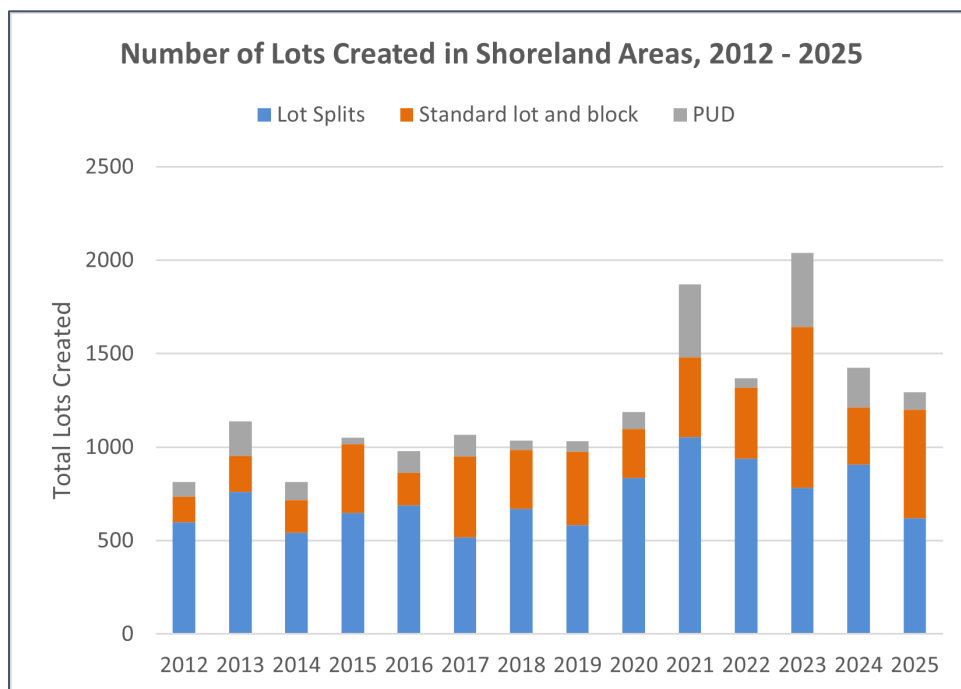
**Figure 4**



## Subdivisions and Lot Splits

Counties created 1,294 new shoreland lots in 2025, the majority through lot splits. This is slightly above the overall average since 2012.

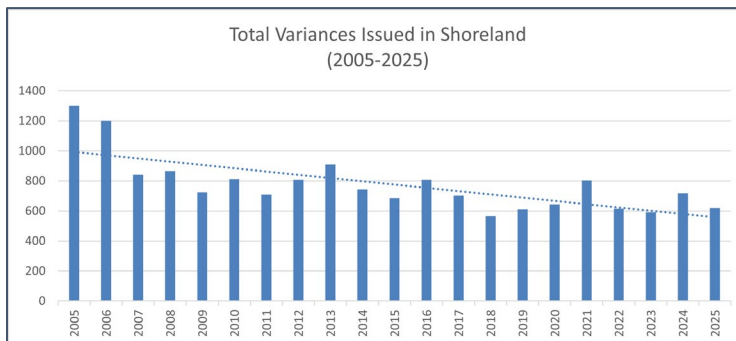
**Figure 5**



## Variations

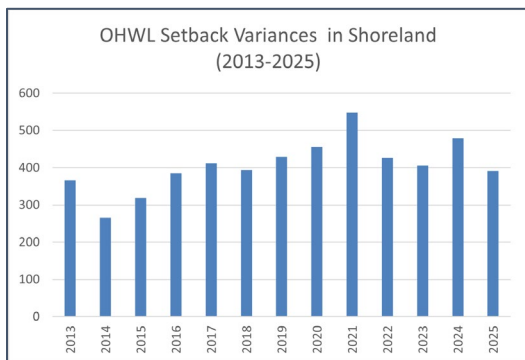
**Total Variations.** The 85 counties reported a total of 621 shoreland variations during 2025. This is in keeping with an overall pattern of decline in reported variations since 2005 (see Figure 6). During 2025 53 counties reported variations in shoreland and 32 counties reported no variations in shorelands.

**Figure 6**

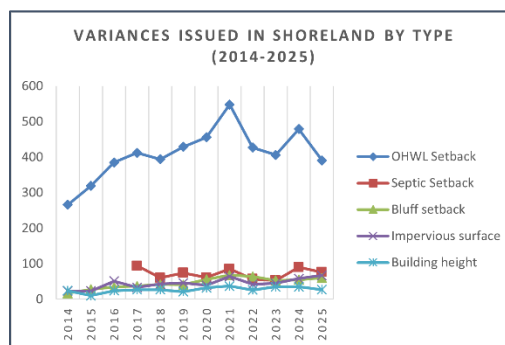


**Types of Variations.** With nearly 400 instances, variations for Ordinary High Water Level (OHWL) setbacks were almost twice as common (See Figure 7) than all other types of shoreland variations (See Figure 8).

**Figure 7**

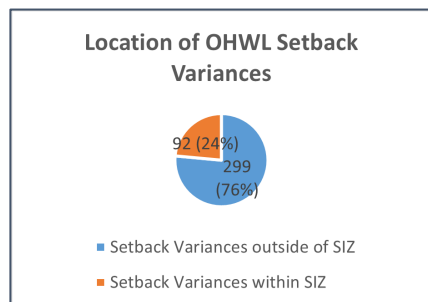


**Figure 8**

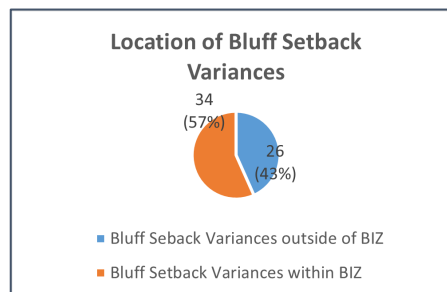


The shore impact zone (SIZ) and bluff impact zone (BIZ) are the shoreland areas most sensitive to development impacts, and most important for the health of lakes and rivers. The survey asked counties to report how many setback variations they approved in these sensitive areas (see Figures 9 and 10).

**Figure 9**



**Figure 10**



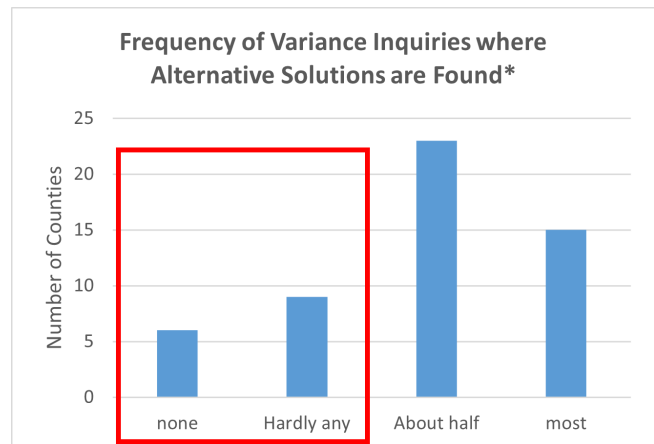
## Survey Responses Regarding Effective Approaches to Finding Alternatives to Variances

Counties were asked to share approaches that have proven effective for them in finding alternatives to granting variances. Some of these are:

- Discussing alternative proposals that would meet ordinance standards was effective in many cases for landowners. It saved them the cost of the variance process and other things that would have been needed for the variance (Surveying, Engineering).
- I make a point to meet with the landowners onsite to discuss what they want to do and we talk about any alternative options. Have also been working with the DNR Hydrologist to look at some alternative designs that could be completed on County owned parks to give lake shore owners something to see when we talk about alternatives while stabilizing our slopes.
- Our staff works through the criterion with them and explain to landowners what alternative options are available to them that do not require a variance as the variance is likely to be denied. We advise them where structures can go without a variance and explain the higher standards they would be subject to if building in shoreland.
- Explaining that if there are alternatives that meet setbacks then the County will not approve the variance. Only if there are no other options to use the lot in a reasonable manner through a variance should you apply for a variance of setbacks.
- Working with applicants to understand their ultimate goals and looking for alternatives which work within the framework of the existing regulations. Ensuring the applicant understands the Board of Adjustment's role and the standards by which their requests will be measured may help applicants focus on their genuine needs.

**Finding Alternatives to Variances.** 72% of all counties proactively work with applicants to bring a project into conformance with the ordinance – thus minimizing or eliminating the need for a variance and its impacts. Figure 11 shows the frequency of variance applications for which alternative solutions were found. Fifteen of the 53 counties (28%) who granted variances in 2025 indicated that they “hardly ever” or “never” find alternatives to variance inquiries, which is nearly the same as last year’s 27%, and down from the previous year’s 35%.

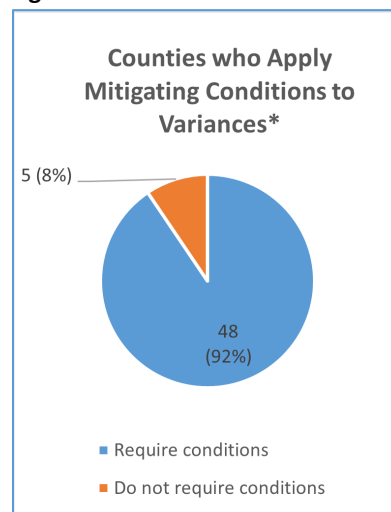
Figure 11



\*of the 53 counties who approved variances in 2025

**Conditions on Variances.** When solutions cannot be found to avoid a variance, community officials can put conditions on variance applications to mitigate potential project impacts. Five of the 53 counties (8%) who granted variances in 2025 indicated that they do not typically impose conditions on variances (see Figure 12), while the majority of counties do so. Imposing conditions to mitigate impacts is always a good idea if they are related to and proportional to the impact.

**Figure 12**



**\*of the 53 counties who approved variances in 2025**

## Shoreland Administration in Townships

The DNR is not always informed by townships who are taking on shoreland zoning so we ask counties to let us know when they become aware of this activity. Counties and the DNR have roles in insuring that township ordinances are consistent with and no less restrictive than county ordinances. The DNR, in collaboration with the Minnesota Association of Townships and MACPZA published [guidance for townships taking on shoreland zoning](#).

Two counties reported a total of three townships taking on shoreland administration in 2025. No counties reported being aware that any townships were considering taking on administration in 2026.

## Riprap Administration

### Introduction

Last year, the DNR asked several questions about riprap regulations and administration to understand perceptions, local regulations, and challenges in reducing the amount of unnecessary riprap. The DNR continued this exercise this year, refining the questions by clarifying them where needed and deleting questions no longer deemed informative.

### Results Summary

Seventy-three, or 86%, of the counties reported that they require a land alteration permit for projects involving the movement of more than 10 cubic yards of material in the Shore Impact Zone (SIZ). This would include, but would not be limited to riprap projects. Counties consider different things as constituting material towards the 10 cubic yard threshold:

- 55 include rock riprap
- 49 include crushed rock filter
- 71 include the earthen material moved prior to laying the rock filter and rock riprap.

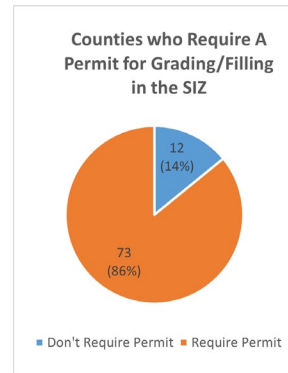
The 12 counties that do not require a land alteration permit for movement of more than 10 yards of material in the SIZ should review their shoreland ordinance for this threshold as it is a requirement for all local governments. If the local ordinance does not include it, it should be added.

Counties vary in the type of permit requirements. Requirements can be broadly grouped into two categories: adherence to performance standards, and existence of qualifying reasons.

Following are the most common qualifying reasons that counties require to exist as a condition of granting a grading/filling permit (some counties require more than one of these):

- Evidence that there is active erosion (43 counties)
- Inability of vegetative solutions to control the problem (36 counties)
- Other (8 counties)

**Figure 13**



## Riprap Performance Standards

52 of 73 counties requiring a land alteration permit for alteration of more than 10 cubic yards in the SIZ require riprap installations to meet specific performance standards (Figure 14). Following are some of the most common requirements (some counties require more than one of these):

- The riprap dimensional standards in the DNR model shoreland ordinance (44 counties)
- Limits on the amount of vegetation removed as a part of riprap installation (32 counties)
- Incorporation of natural buffers into the riprap design (22 counties)
- Limits on the length of the buffer (24 counties)

**Figure 14**



Twenty-one of the 73 counties that require permits for land alteration do not require any performance standards for riprap installations. These counties should review their shoreland ordinance for the DNR

model ordinance riprap dimensional standards. These standards are required for all local government shoreland ordinances. If the local ordinance does not include them, they should be added.

Some counties have more customized riprap installation performance standards including:

- Work with the area hydrologist for best standards
- Applicable site-specific requirements
- The applicant must follow DNR standards for 'rock riprap no permit' criteria. If these cannot be met, the applicant can obtain engineered design plans and submit a public waters work permit to the DNR.
- Minimize vegetation removed, stabilize slopes and establish vegetation or other erosion control measures.
- septic system compliance, tree/brush removal standards, and silt fencing conditions
- BMP's from professionals and other recommendations/guidance received from the County SWCD on such matters.

One county stated that maximum dimensional standards are not in the ordinance because including such information often results in every project being built to the maxim, regardless of need. Instead, the county lists general standards and uses prescriptive measures to tailor the appropriate solutions to the site.

## County Issues or Needs

The challenges of administering shoreland ordinances are diverse. A sample of responses on county needs and issues around shoreland ordinance administration follow. Some are reworded for clarity. DNR uses this information to develop new training and on-demand learning, web resources, and model ordinance updates.

### Variance Guidance

- Guidance to create a solid record of decision findings for all variance criteria
- How to strategically use conditions of approval to help improve shoreland stewardship and mitigate impacts
- refresher variance training would be helpful
- Guidance on what constitutes practical difficulties
- Guidance on special conditions that can be used to counteract the practical impact of a variance
- Additional review comments from area hydrologists
- Variance training for members of citizen-based boards

### Other General comments about shoreland issues

- Guidance on slope stabilization and alternatives, and training on alternatives to riprap
- Guidance on determining and demonstrating levels of existing erosion
- Timely guidance on updates to the DNR Model Ordinance standards
- Training on DNR standards and how to apply them when land use activities pertain to land disturbance and different project acreages
- The DNR should require permits for riprap
- Riprap standards
- Best practices for design and installation of riprap

- Shoreland restoration training, for county staff, contractors, and property owners
- Training and guidance for the BOA on the rationale for and importance of the shoreland rules
- Online training for the BOA
- Increased online and virtual options for shoreland training
- Onsite assistance from the DNR during site inspections

## DNR shoreland-related web pages

Following are key DNR shoreland-related webpages:

- [Shoreland Management](#) – The main source of shoreland information with links to many other resources and webpages including the following webpages:
- [Lake, river and stream classifications](#)
- [Shoreland & river-related training](#)
- [Climate trends affecting shoreland](#)
- [Bluff resources](#)
- [Variances](#)



### ECOLOGICAL AND WATER RESOURCES

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