

Wisconsin Water Quality Report to Congress 2026



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All photos courtesy of Wisconsin DNR unless otherwise credited.

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Front cover: "Evening Sailboat Race on Lake Onalaska" by Ken Johnson

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Introduction

Wisconsin is a state with bountiful natural resources, including many and varied lakes, streams, wetlands, aquifers, and springs. Every other year, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) provides reports on the quality of the State's water resources to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which in turn, shares this information with the United States Congress. The information provided may be considered as a tool for rulemaking, budget appropriations, and program evaluation by federal legislators.

There are over five and a half million people in Wisconsin that share the water resources within the borders of the state. Wisconsin has approximately 1.2 million lake and impoundment acres and approximately 88,000 river and stream miles. Despite the abundance of water resources in Wisconsin, many are threatened by human-induced stressors.

Key Findings

- 81% of evaluated waters are healthy, by waterbody/assessment unit (AU) count
- 102 listings on 93 waters were added to the Impaired Waters List and Waters in Restoration List.
- The top four newly listed pollutants were: phosphorus (40%), *E. coli* (16%), PFOA (15%), and "Unknown" (evidence of degraded aquatic vegetation; 12%).
- 16 listings were removed and 8 waterbodies were moved to the Waters Attaining Standards list.
- 10 new listings were covered by existing TMDLs

The Assessment Process

This document highlights assessment findings from the 2026 reporting cycle (2026 cycle), and considers data from 2015-2024, depending on the parameter. New data considered this cycle are from the years 2023-2024. The 2026 cycle began on April 1, 2024, after the submission of the 2024 Integrated Report and Water Condition Lists. The first task of the new assessment cycle is to make updates to the assessment methodology (below). Then data are assembled in preparation for evaluation according to the updated methodology.

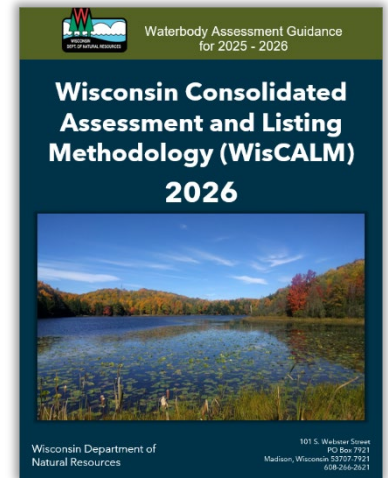
The Clean Water Act asks that all readily available data are used to assess a state's water quality. Before the assessments are done the DNR sends out a request for water quality data. Waters are assessed using quality-assured data originating from DNR's monitoring program, county and state partners, university partners, and the public. All data used for assessment meet DNR's quality assurance requirements and local DNR staff determine whether available data were representative of a water's condition.

Assessment Methodology

DNR's water quality assessment goal is to use clearly defined, publicly accessible methods for collection and analysis of data to ensure defensible assessment decisions. To this end, the DNR built upon its 2024 assessment methodology work by creating a revised [Wisconsin Consolidated Assessment and Listing Methodology \(WisCALM\)](#) to conduct assessments in 2026 for determining the attainment of designated uses.

The most significant updates were:

- Clarifying which PFAS compounds are assessed and their associated parameters in SWIMS.
- Noting that assessments of aquatic plant communities are not appropriate for reservoirs.
- Clarifying that qPCR tests for *E. coli* cannot be used for assessment purposes.



Wisconsin DNR Data

Chemistry data collected by staff, volunteers, and grant recipients, among others, go to the State Lab of Hygiene (SLOH), which sends its data to the SWIMS database through the Laboratory Data Entry System (LDES). Data in SWIMS are considered readily available and are used in assessments when they meet assessment requirements. Data in SWIMS were assessed using automated assessment packages that are programmed to follow assessment protocols outlined in [Wisconsin Consolidated Assessment and Listing Methodology \(WisCALM\)](#). Other data sets not in SWIMS such as fish and aquatic plant surveys were manually assembled and summarized for review.

Public Data

In addition to DNR's monitoring data described above, public data were gathered and considered for use in assessments through an active data solicitation process. Every two years, the DNR requests that citizens and interested groups submit their surface water data (biological, chemical, and physical). Data meeting specified requirements were evaluated, along with DNR-collected data, to assess the quality of the state's water resources. Data were accepted from the public from March 3 to April 1, 2025, and the DNR received information/data submittals from three entities. With newer updates to SWIMS, more partners are able to submit their data electronically outside of the formal public data solicitation period.

Public Comment Periods

Public comments were sought during multiple points of the assessment process. First, the public was given the opportunity to comment on the draft WisCALM from March 26th to April 24th, 2025. The DNR documented and responded to all comments; these can be found on the [WisCALM web page](#). Then, the public was offered the chance to comment on the 2026 Draft Water Condition Lists and TMDL updates from February 16th to March 18th, 2026. These comments and DNR responses can be found on the [Water Condition Lists web page](#).

Statewide Water Quality

Assessed Parameters

The single most assessed parameter during the 2026 cycle was Fish Index of Biotic Integrity (fIBI), followed by total phosphorus and Macroinvertebrate Index of Biotic Integrity (mIBI). The fIBI and mIBI are multi-metric indices that synthesize information about a community of fish or invertebrates into a single number. The

metrics making up the fIBI or mIBI might include the proportion of individuals in the sample that require high dissolved oxygen, the proportion of individuals from a certain feeding guild, or a measure of diversity. Biotic indices are a valuable tool for assessments because they reflect the sum of the environmental conditions across the lifespans of all the individuals in the sample.

Total phosphorus is the most evaluated chemical parameter. DNR released its [Nutrient Reduction Strategy](#) in 2013 (currently updating and now called Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy) and numeric water quality criteria for assessments were established in 2010. In this cycle, about two-thirds of phosphorus assessments attained standards. Wisconsin’s assessment methodology places the greatest weight on assessments with results from both biological and chemical parameters.

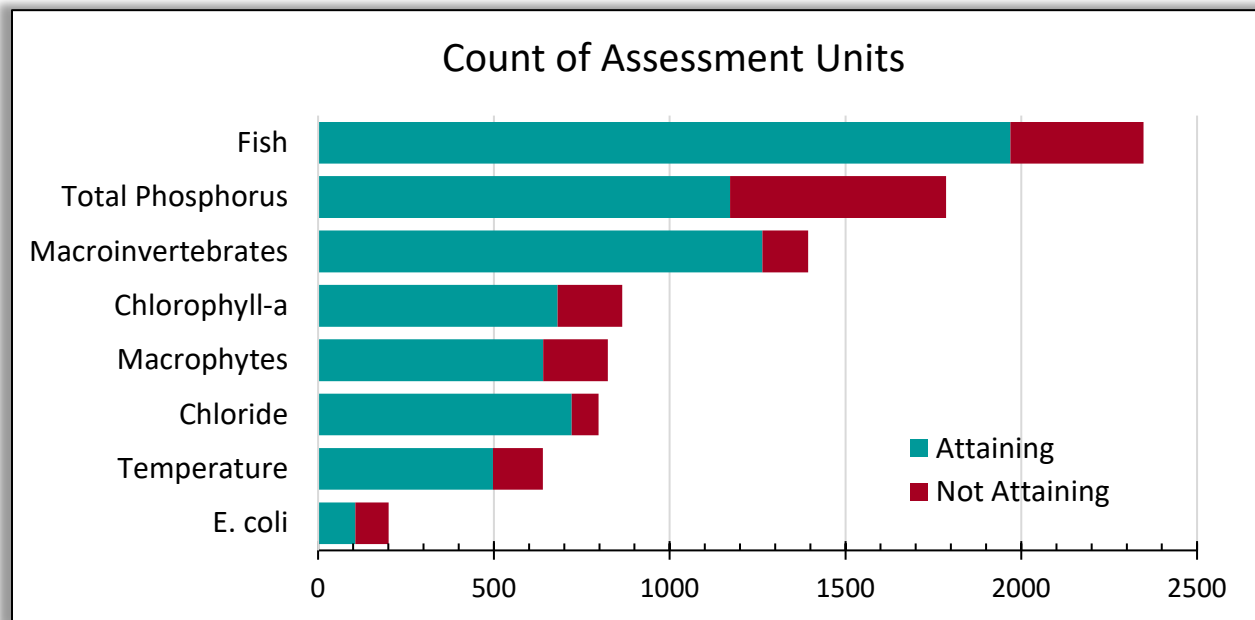


Figure 1. Number of AUs assessed for common parameters during development of the 2026 Water Condition Lists. Parameters showing attainment are from the years 2015-2024. Parameters showing non-attainment may be from 1998 or later; these data are considered current until new data show improved conditions. Some compounds like PFAS and metals are not shown due to the low number of waters assessed.

2026 Water Condition Lists

These Water Condition Lists serve as a record of water quality across the state and are a starting point for water resource management. Changes in the Water Condition Lists are the result of restoration planning work, advances in monitoring and assessment technology, additional monitoring data, and water quality restorations.

In the 2026 cycle the Waters Attaining Standards List saw the greatest increase in number of waters. Some waters were moved from this list to the Impaired Waters or Waters in Restoration Lists as conditions changed or new problems were documented, however there were enough newly-assessed waters in good condition to increase the total.

Table 1. Summary of waters (AUs) and listing counts on each of the Water Condition Lists.

2026 Water Condition Lists	No. of Waters	No. of Pollutant Listings
Attaining	8010	-
(change from 2024)	+76	-
Impaired	1325	1573
(change from 2024)	+60	+82
In Restoration	447	679
(change from 2024)	+3	+8

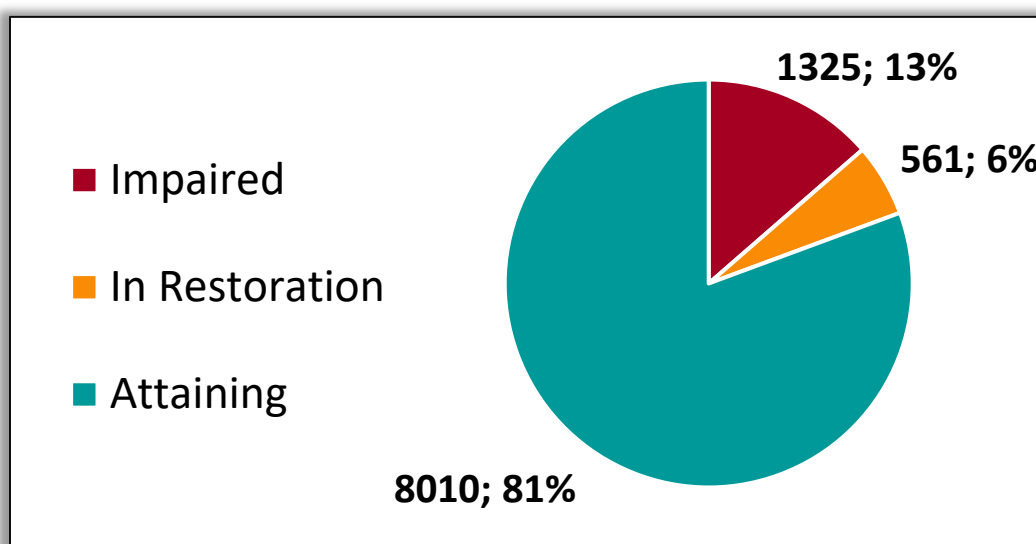


Figure 2. Number and percentage of AUs assessed in the 2026 cycle on each condition list.

Waters Attaining Standards List

The Waters Attaining Standards List (formerly named Healthy Waters List) contains 81% of assessed waters. A total of 137 waters were newly assessed during the 2026 cycle and determined to be on the attaining standards list. Of these, 120 were river segments, 15 were lakes or reservoirs, and 2 were beaches or bays. New river segments most often appeared on the Waters Attaining Standards list because of a new fIBI score in the “Fair” category or better, whereas new lakes were usually assigned to this list based on attainment of phosphorus standards.

The full list of Waters Attaining Standards can be found in [Appendix E](#).

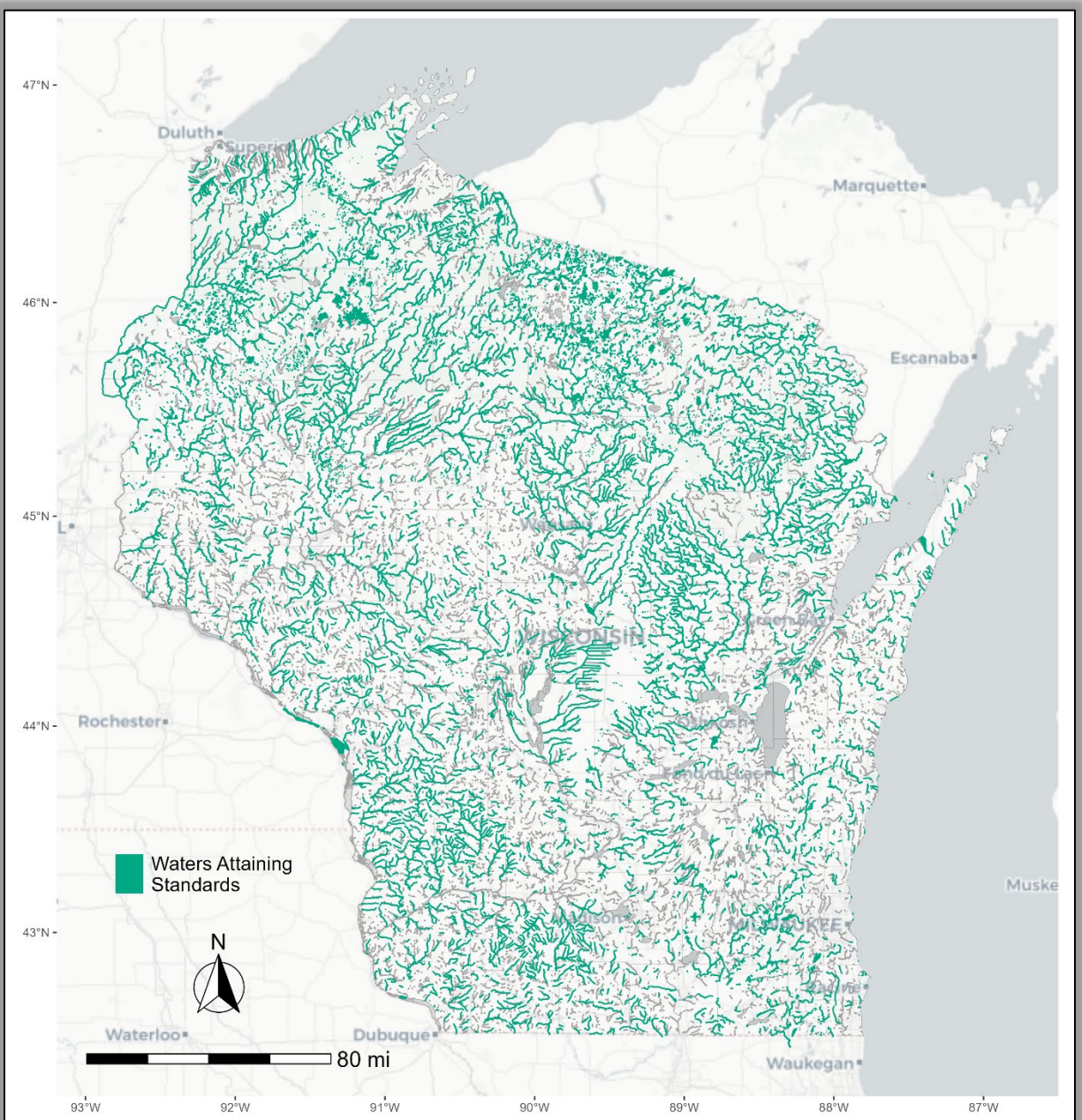


Figure 3. Location of all waters on the Waters Attaining Standards List across the state of Wisconsin.

Impaired Waters List

The majority of pollutant listings, nearly 50%, are for phosphorus (Nutrients in Figure 4). This corresponds with the state's focus on nutrient reduction in our waterways (see [Wisconsin's Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy](#)). The full Impaired Waters List can be found in [Appendix A](#).

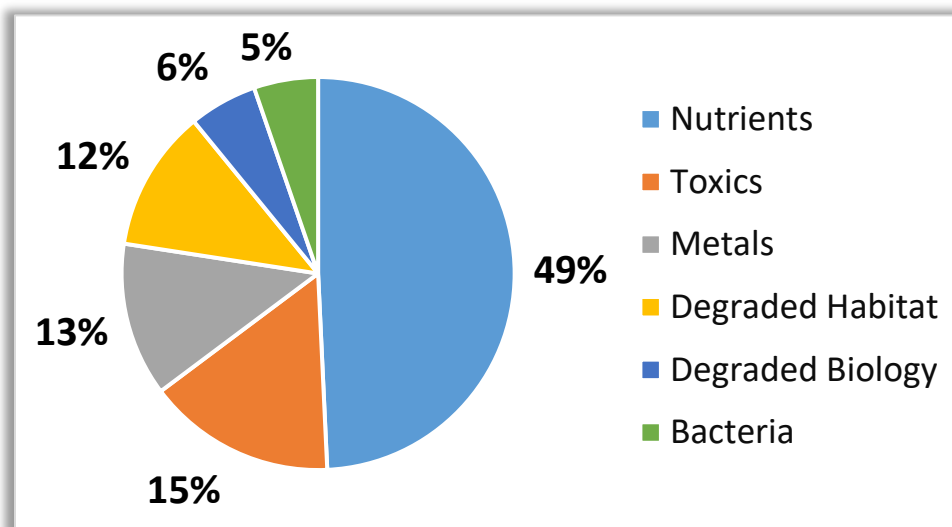


Figure 4. Categories of pollutant listings on the 2026 Impaired Waters List.

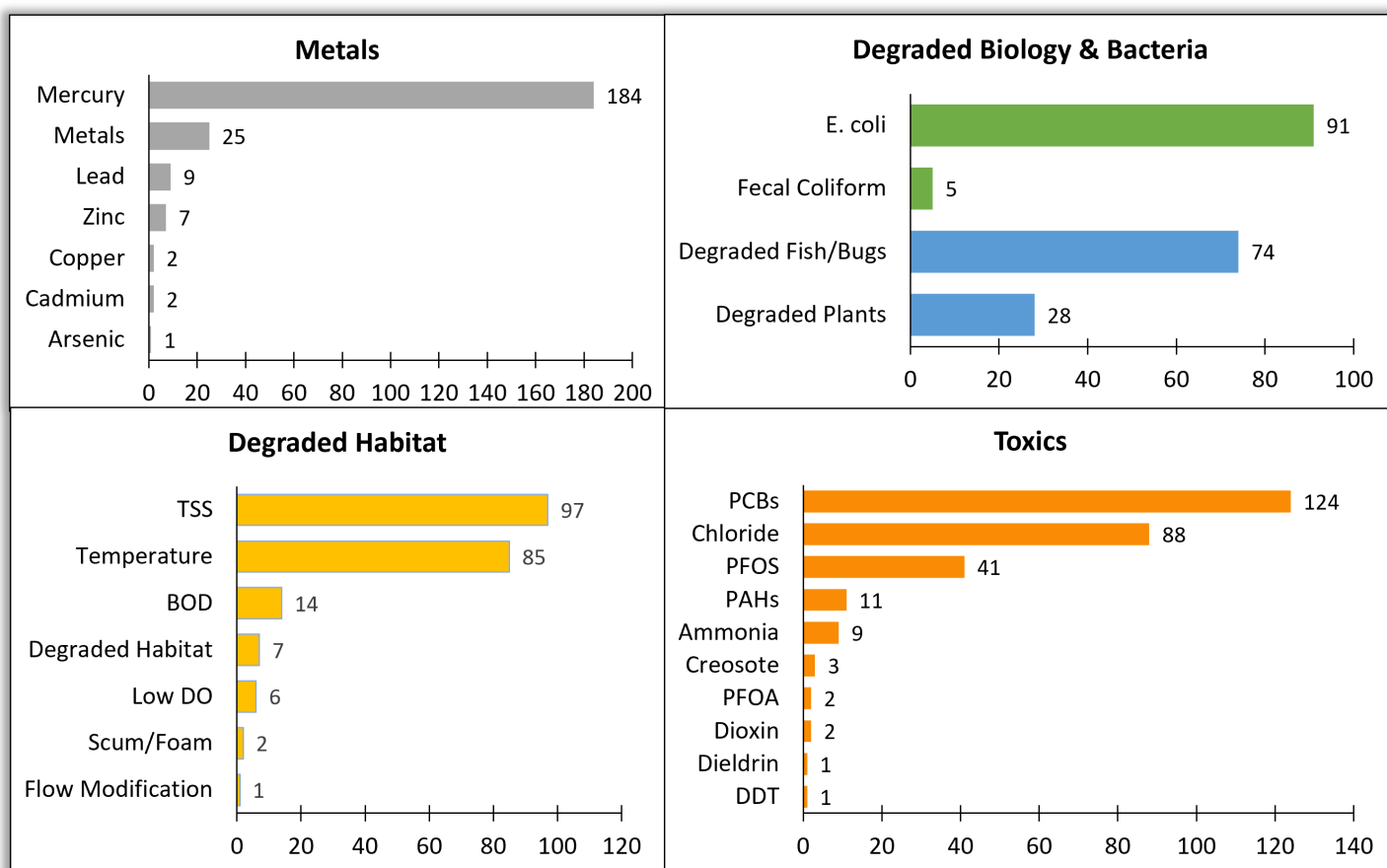


Figure 5. Breakdown of pollutants by category on the 2026 Impaired Waters List. Degraded biology listings are those with a Cause Unknown.

Mercury and PCBs are at the next most commonly listed pollutants. These listings typically reflect historic contamination that is difficult to remediate rather than ongoing release of these substances.

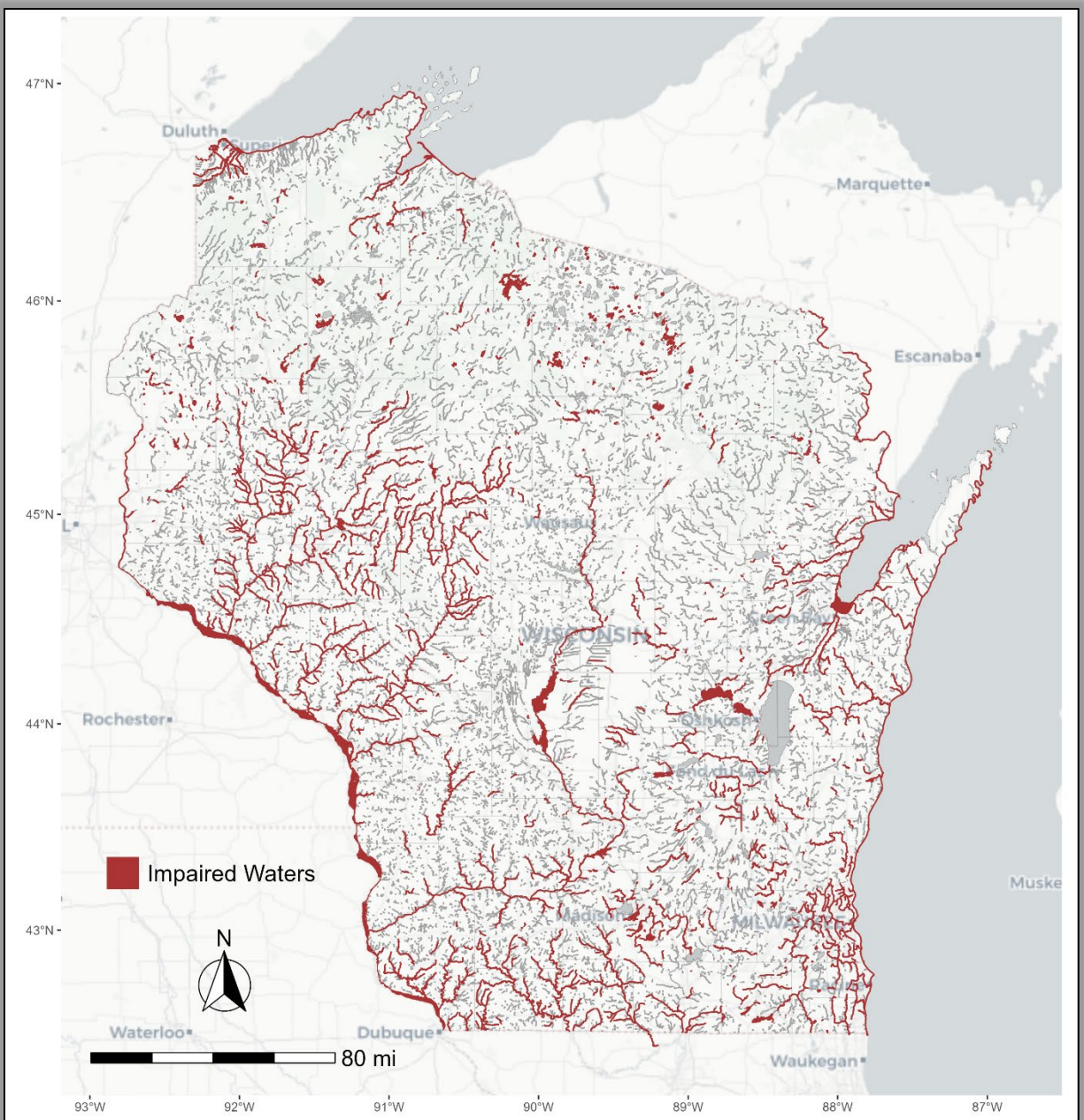


Figure 6. Location of waters on the Impaired Waters List across the state.

Waters In Restoration List

Phosphorus (Nutrients) and TSS (Degraded Habitat) make up the majority of impairments covered by TMDLs (Figure 8). This is partly because areas of the state with more waters impaired due to these pollutants are assigned higher priority for TMDL development. Full implementation of a TMDL can take a long time, but when achieved, these waters are expected to meet water quality standards and may be candidates for delisting. More information about current and future TMDL development is available later in this document.

The full Waters In Restoration List can be found in [Appendix B](#).

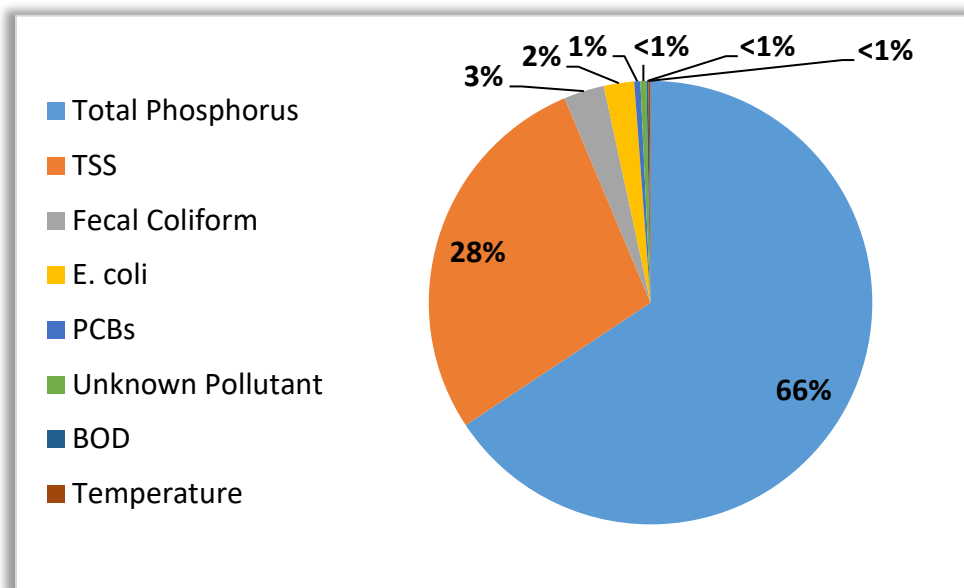


Figure 7. Types of listings on the 2026 Waters in Restoration List.

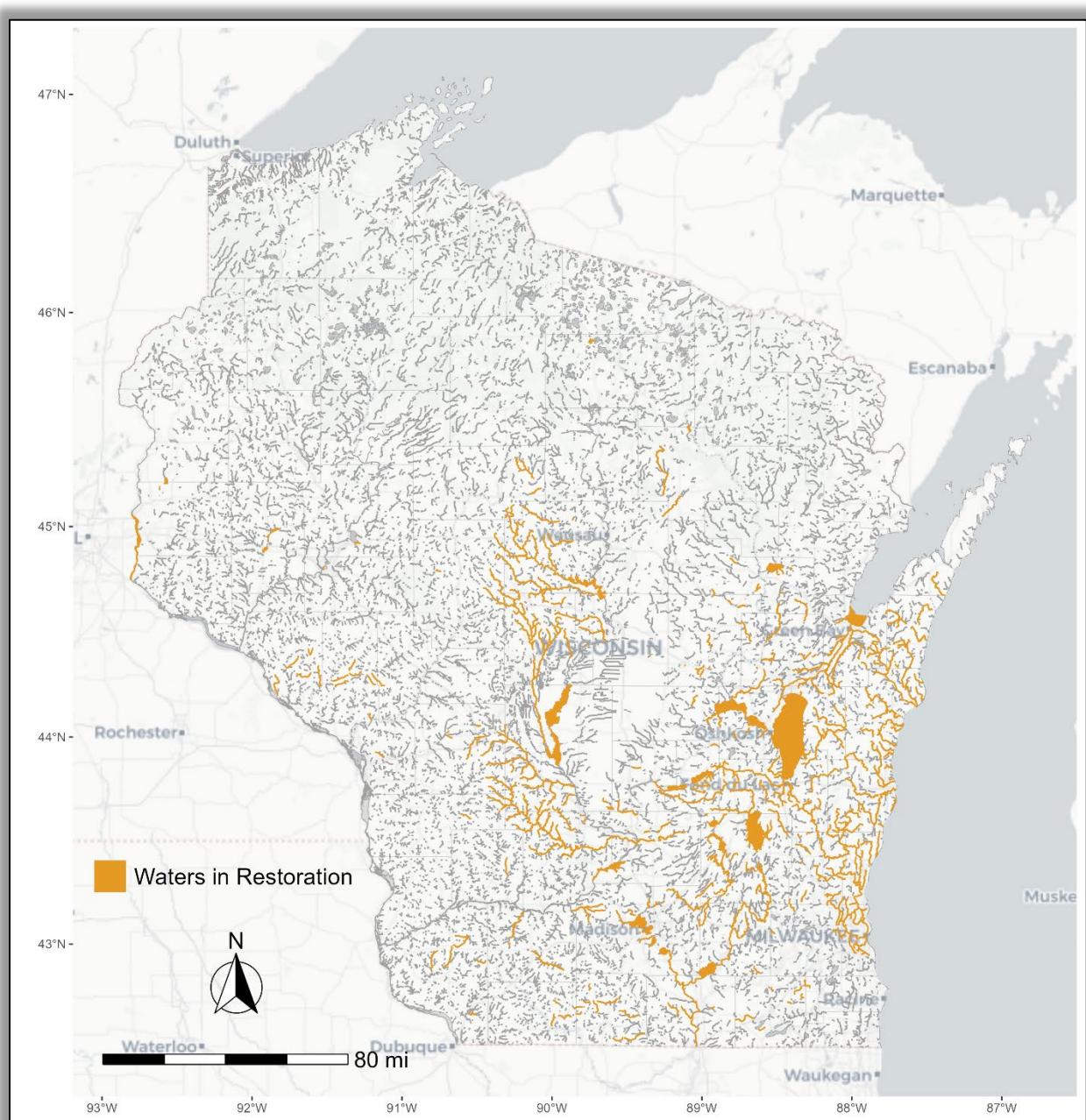


Figure 8. Location of waters on the Waters In Restoration List across the state.

New Pollutant Listings

In the 2026 assessment cycle there were 102 listings added to the Impaired Waters and Waters in Restoration Lists. Figure 9 breaks down the listings by parameter and the available restoration plans. As in past cycles, high phosphorus makes up a large proportion of new pollutant listings. The increase in number of listings for PFOA reflects increased surface water and fish tissue sampling in response to new science and public interest. There were no new listings covered by a Nine Key Element Plan in this cycle. There were 10 listings that were part of existing TMDLs, making them part of the 2026 Waters In Restoration List.

The full list of new listings can be found in [Appendix C](#).

Table 2. Number of new listings added to the Impaired Waters and Waters in Restoration Lists during the 2026 cycle.

2026 Water Condition Lists	No. of New Listings
Impaired	92
In Restoration	10

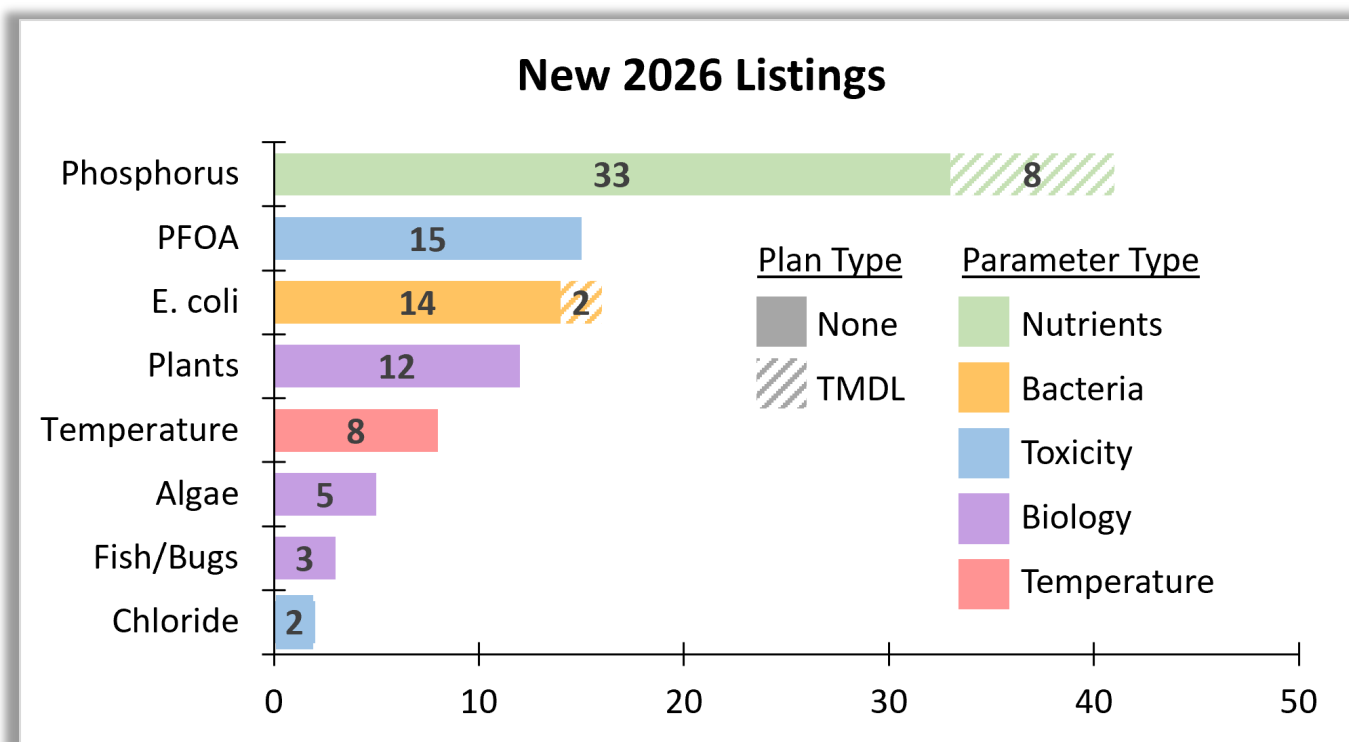


Figure 9. Number of new listings by parameter and plan type.

New Listings in TMDL Areas

This cycle ten new listings were covered by four different existing TMDLs: The Milwaukee River Basin (4), Northeast Lakeshore (1), Rock River Basin (1), and Upper Fox and Wolf Basins (4). New appendices were made for each basin TMDL to outline which waters were now included and which allocations applied. These appendices were given to the public for comment prior to review and approval by EPA. This was the second assessment cycle where TMDL updates were included in the process. Several additional listings in TMDL areas (not shown) were determined to not be covered, i.e. while full TMDL implementation would probably improve water quality, DNR cannot be certain that water quality standards would be achieved.

Table 3. New 2026 listings covered by existing TMDLs.

Waterbody Name	DNR AU ID	WBIC	EPA AU ID	Listing Status	TMDL
Unnamed Stream	6920414	793700	WI10042077	Proposed for List	Rock River Basin
Neenah Creek	10729	173800	WI10026186	Proposed for List	Upper Fox-Wolf Basin
Willow Creek	10768	243700	WI10034820	Proposed for List	Upper Fox-Wolf Basin
Sawyer Creek	11003	139800	WI10000954	Proposed for List	Upper Fox-Wolf Basin
Fox River (At Oshkosh)	352759	117900	WI10008466	Proposed for List	Upper Fox-Wolf Basin
Cedar Creek	1437248	21300	WI10023201	Impairment Addition	Milwaukee River Basin
Menomonee River	6876527	16000	WI6876528	Impairment Addition	Milwaukee River Basin
Unnamed Creek	10082	30900	WI10000269	Impairment Addition	Milwaukee River Basin
Unnamed Stream	5481196	5030968	WI10031323	Impairment Addition	Milwaukee River Basin
Wolf Lake	11367	60800	WI10026366	Proposed for List	Northeast Lakeshore

PFAS Compounds

This cycle, 15 new pollutant listings are proposed for either PFOS or PFOA, the two PFAS compounds for which Wisconsin has developed criteria for concentrations in surface waters or fish tissue. The majority of these listings are [fish consumption advisories](#) based upon fish tissue analysis from the area around the town of Stella, Oneida County. When it is unsafe to consume fish from a waterbody, the water does not meet one of its designated uses and the water is impaired (Figure 11).

Snowden Lake in Onieda county has both a PFOS impairment based upon fish tissue analysis and a PFOA impairment based upon samples taken from the water column. Unlike PFOS, the primary exposure pathway for PFOA is through accidental ingestion during recreation; concentrations in the lake water were high enough to warrant this additional impairment from PFOA.

Several impairments were also added for streams around General Mitchell Airport in Milwaukee (Table 4). In this case, the PFOS impairments originate from water column samples. There is a reliable relationship between concentrations of PFOS in water and concentrations in fish tissue, and there is high confidence that fish caught in these waters would be unsafe to consume.

Table 4. New listings in the 2026 cycle for PFOS or PFOA.

Waterbody Name	Water Type	WBIC	DNR AU ID	EPA AU ID	Counties	Impairment / Source
Fifth Lake	LAKE	1571100	128111	WI10007280	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Fourth Lake	LAKE	1570000	128115	WI10007284	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Moen Lake	LAKE	1573800	128230	WI10008940	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Second Lake	LAKE	1572300	128279	WI10007424	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Snowden Lake	LAKE	1572300	128279	WI10007424	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Snowden Lake	LAKE	1018600	128292	WI10007437	Oneida	PFOA / Water Column
Starks Creek	RIVER	1572400	12817	WI10026735	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Starks Creek	RIVER	1572400	12818	WI10002289	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Starks Creek	RIVER	1572400	18417	WI10006369	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Starks Spring	SPRINGS-LAKE	1573700	128306	WI10007449	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Sunset Lake	RESERVOIR	1572500	128312	WI10007454	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Third Lake	LAKE	1572200	128317	WI10007459	Oneida	PFOS / Fish Tissue
Mitchell Field Ditch	RIVER	14800	9968	WI10008035	Milwaukee	PFOA / Water Column
Mitchell Field Ditch	RIVER	14800	9968	WI10008035	Milwaukee	PFOS / Water Column
Wilson Park Creek	RIVER	15200	9976	WI10000204	Milwaukee	PFOS / Water Column

Pollutant Removals

There were 15 pollutant listings removed during the 2026 cycle (Figure 10). Seven of those waterbodies are now moved to the Waters Attaining Standards List, the other eight still have other impairments that must be addressed. Eight of the delisted pollutants were on rivers, the other seven were on lakes. One delisting this cycle was the result of a mistaken listing in 2024, the others represent tangible improvements in water quality due to restoration efforts.

The most common pollutant removed was total phosphorus, as addressing this pollutant continues to be a primary focus for both Wisconsin DNR and many partner organizations. Much of the state is now covered by TMDLs to address both total phosphorus and total suspended sediment, and as implementation progresses we can hope to see more delistings for both pollutants.

The full list of delistings is available in [Appendix D](#).

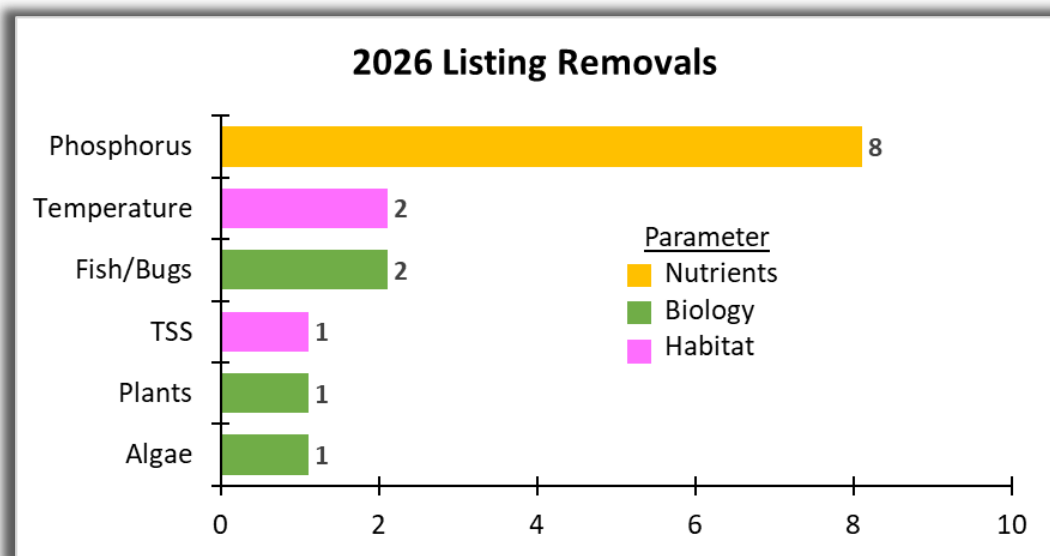


Figure 10. Listings removed in the 2024 cycle.

Spring Creek, Green County

Spring Creek is a 10.6-mile waterbody in Green County in southern Wisconsin. The creek meanders through pasture and farmland, flowing northeast, then east, before its confluence with the larger Sugar River. Spring Creek is managed through a partnership between Green County and the DNR.

In 1998, Spring Creek was placed on the state's 303(d) list of impaired waters for degraded habitat due to sedimentation from nonpoint sources. It was recommended that buffer strips and bank stabilization would enhance this stream. In 2005, a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) was approved which outlined steps for sediment control.

The Green County Office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) approached the department with a proposal to use



Spring Creek in Green County. Photo credit: WDNR

National Water Quality Initiatives (NWQI) funding to implement best management practices (BMPs). From 2016 through 2019, almost \$900,000 was spent in the watershed. Nearly 8,000 acres were planted in cover crops, three waste storage facilities were built, and grassed waterways and stream (cattle) crossings were put in. Almost a mile of streambank protection was funded through NWQI with an additional 6,000 feet paid for by a landowner.

In 2021, biologists monitored Spring Creek to assess habitat and determine whether it was meeting its attainable biological use. Through the project, very steep banks (some greater than 2 meters high) that had been susceptible to erosion were sloped, grassed and stabilized, ultimately mitigating the bedload of sediment that was coming in from bank erosion. Young-of-year smallmouth bass were found at multiple sites along the creek, indicating that adult bass had migrated upstream into Spring Creek to spawn. Several specimens of brown trout, a coldwater indicator species, were found and one specimen of redbfin shiner, a state threatened species, was found. This was the first time this species had been reported in this stream.

Spring Creek is now meeting its attainable use from a fishery standpoint. While there is still “legacy” sediment present in the stream, it is no longer overwhelming the substrate, and improvements are expected as time passes. Thanks to cooperation with Green County and willing landowners, Spring Creek has now been removed from the state's 303(d) list of impaired waters.

Public Participation

The Clean Water Act depends on public involvement and Wisconsin lakes and rivers are public resources, owned in common by all Wisconsin citizens. Throughout the process of assessing and addressing water quality problems there are many opportunities for public comment, including input on proposed water quality standards, updates to the impaired waters listings, and TMDL creation. In Wisconsin, citizen-based monitoring data are used in water quality assessments if minimum data requirements are met, and there are several opportunities for citizens to volunteer.

Monitoring

Citizens provide a vital resource for gathering water quality data across the state of Wisconsin. There are multiple programs available for training and monitoring through the DNR, University of Wisconsin, and environmental groups.

Citizen Lake Monitoring Network (CLMN)

Wisconsin's Citizen Lake Monitoring Network (CLMN) provides a bond between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin Extension Lakes Program, and about 1,000 volunteer citizens. DNR and Extension staff provide training, support and equipment, and cover the cost of laboratory analysis of water samples. CLMN volunteers enter their own data into a statewide online database. An online data exploration tool called the Water Explorer (WEx) provides interactive displays of volunteer-collected data. CLMN recently launched an Application Programming Interface (API) service that can be used by the public to generate PDF or HTML reports of various types of lake water quality data and ice cover data.



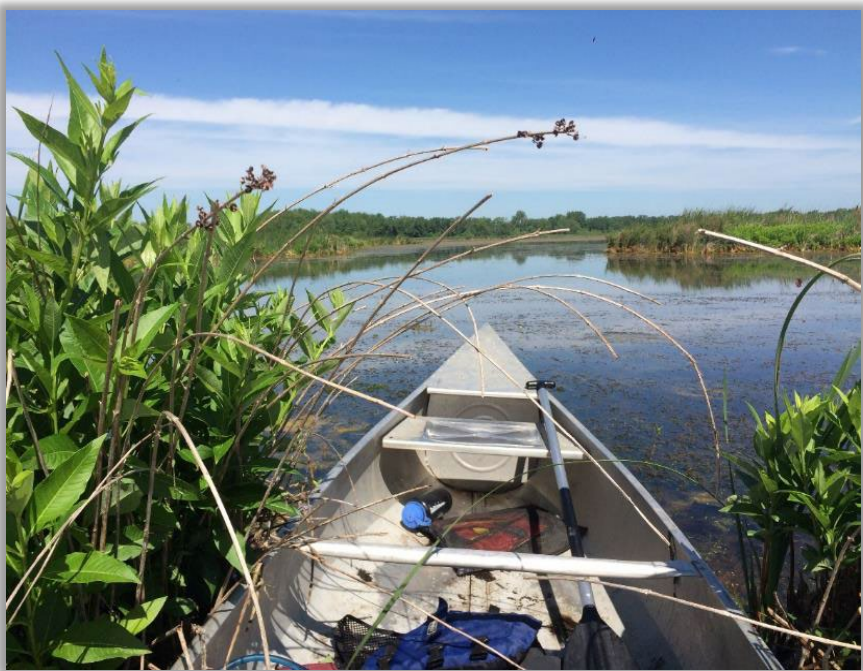
Starting with just over 100 volunteers in 1986, CLMN participants collected water clarity data on around 113 lakes. Participation has trended upward since then, and many additional parameters have been available to volunteers. Volunteer responsibilities range from simple bi-weekly water clarity readings to more frequent monitoring of clarity, total phosphorus, chlorophyll- α , water temperature profiles, dissolved oxygen, aquatic invasive species, and more.

As of January 2026, 728 CLMN volunteers had entered their data into the database. The Citizen Lake Monitoring Network requests that data

be entered by November 1st, but data tend to come in through early spring of the following year for various reasons. A new online login system was launched in May 2025 and many volunteers had still not created their new username and password needed to enter their 2025 data. Data was entered for 891 distinct monitoring sites in 2025 (1,044 in 2024), with water clarity data being the most common. Over 500 volunteers also collected data on total phosphorus, chlorophyll- α , and temperature profiles. Wisconsin is very lucky to have such a devoted network of volunteers partnering with DNR to monitor conditions on our lakes to provide a wealth of assessment data.

CLMN chemistry volunteers (who collect phosphorus, chlorophyll- α , temperature, and clarity data) follow strict protocols to ensure consistency and high-quality data. About 10% of them are selected annually for extra Quality Assurance sampling. Through this robust QA/QC program, we are able to proudly demonstrate the impressive quality and reliability of our volunteers' work.

The Citizen Lake Monitoring Network embraced the world of digital training media since 2019 and recently created additional demonstration videos to recruit and train volunteers. The CLMN video series is available on YouTube and on our [program website](#), and walks volunteers through everything from creating a database login name to collecting measurements and water samples to retrieving a data report to share with their friends and neighbors. In-person training on monitoring protocols is still the standard for new volunteers, but the video series is useful to refresh volunteers on protocols and details after a long winter season.



Sampling Wisconsin's waters.

Table 5. 2024 and 2025 Citizen Lake Monitoring Network participation. *2025 Reported data still incomplete as of this report publication.

	Total Volunteers	Lakes	Sites	Clarity Volunteers	Chemistry Volunteers	AIS Volunteers	Ice Volunteers
2024	892	712	1044	774	~500	54	165
2025*	728	619	891	632	~500	54	131

Water Action Volunteers (WAV)

Participants in the Water Action Volunteers (WAV) volunteer stream monitoring program range far and wide across the state of Wisconsin. WAV is a collaboration of the Wisconsin DNR and the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension. The participatory science program relies heavily on partnerships with local WAV coordinators at participating organizations to help recruit, train and support volunteers in their local area on the WAV methods. Since its founding in 1996, volunteers have collected data in all 72 counties. In 2024, WAV supported over 500 volunteers and 42 partner groups in stream monitoring statewide.



Baseline Monitoring

Volunteers enter the WAV program by training to do baseline stream monitoring. Each year, baseline volunteers journey to their monitoring sites once per month from May to October to collect four baseline

parameters: dissolved oxygen, instantaneous temperature, transparency, and streamflow. During at least two of these months (May/June and September/October), volunteers also collect macroinvertebrates to calculate a biotic index score. Once per season, some advanced volunteers also conduct a habitat assessment. In 2024, volunteers collected this baseline data at 507 unique monitoring sites.

Special Projects Monitoring

After at least one season of baseline monitoring, some WAV volunteers will support special projects monitoring. Special projects monitoring is designed to either use the same methods as DNR professionals for data collection or to meet specific data needs. Recently these special projects have included monitoring with meters, aquatic invasive species monitoring, nutrient monitoring, and deploying continuous temperature monitors.

Nutrient monitoring is the most widespread of these special projects. Volunteers sample for total phosphorus concentrations in rivers and streams. In some instances, volunteers also collect suspended solids samples and/or nitrogen panels. These samples contribute to follow-up monitoring, Local Needs Projects, Nine Key Element Projects, TMDL area monitoring, and Targeted Watershed Approach Projects. In 2024, volunteers coordinated by WAV and local partners collected nutrient samples at over 198 sites across the state. This monitoring included not only DNR projects but also projects for businesses, watershed groups, and counties extending from Trempealeau to Waukesha and beyond.

Volunteers also assist in deploying continuous temperature monitors, called thermistors. Temperature affects oxygen availability and demand, and it can predict the types of organisms able to survive in a stream. Each season volunteers with WAV and partner organizations deploy and monitor thermistors at over 90 sites.



Volunteers are critical to many of DNR's monitoring efforts, whether they participate for one day or several years!

AIS Snapshot Day

University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, in partnership with UW Extension Lakes and DNR, hosts a joint lake, stream, and wetland invasive species Snapshot Day. This event organizes citizen scientists around the state to monitor priority bridge-stream crossings, boat landings and roadsides/trails for AIS of concern on a given day in August.

In 2024, 159 participants visited 115 sites. Aquatic invasive species were reported at 64% of those sites.

Lake Monitoring Protection Network for Aquatic Invasive Species

The Lake Monitoring Protection Network (LMPN) program was developed to provide stable funding to counties and ensure statewide coverage for AIS work. This program transformed an unpredictable, competitive grant process into a consistent funding model dividing approximately \$1 million to the 72 counties of our state. Counties can now rely on non-competitive funding from year to year to perform core network activities.

A few of these activities include:

- Citizen Lake Monitoring Network (CLMN)
- Early detection monitoring for aquatic invasive species
- Participating in the Clean Boats, Clean Waters (CBCW) Program
- Participating in the Purple Loosestrife Biocontrol program
- Participating in other aquatic invasive species prevention campaigns and lake protection activities as approved by the Department

Wisconsin's Aquatic Invasive Species Management Plan takes a proactive prevention approach by addressing the "Pathways", which are the ways AIS can enter and move throughout the state. The LMPN partners are a major component in this type of work by educating dock service providers, monitoring pet stores, and reaching out to pond and wetland gardeners regarding AIS.

In the first year of LMPN (2021) approximately 40 counties participated, and in 2025 we had 69 counties involved. The LMPN model is evaluated each year to note what's working and what's not quite there, yet. The DNR and program (CBCW, Snapshot Day, etc.) leads continue to examine the model to identify improvements and new tools that could increase program success. Input from our LMPN partners is also welcome and important to the process.

The LMPN partners have significantly and successfully increased AIS monitoring efforts throughout the state. Under the competitive grant model, some counties had no ability to perform consistent AIS monitoring. At that time the partners performed and led over 500 monitoring events, which included early detection monitoring and leading citizen monitoring through events such as AIS Snapshot Day. Since 2024 there has been 95% statewide coverage through the LMPN program and accounts for at least 50% of the statewide monitoring events that occurred.



Figure 11. Maps show the increased participation in the LMPN program from 2021 to 2025. Counties in dark blue are those participating in the LMPN program. Counties in light blue are those that participated in the previous grant program.

Monitoring, Restoration & Protection

Monitoring and restoration work are on a continuous cycle. Monitoring and restoration for the 2026 cycle were guided by the:

- [2021 – 2025 Wisconsin Water Quality Monitoring Strategy](#);
- [2013 Nutrient Reduction Strategy and its progress reports](#); and the
- 2022 – 2032 Water Quality Restoration and Protection Prioritization Framework

Monitoring Strategy

Wisconsin's Water Quality Monitoring Strategy represents DNR's vision to fulfill Wisconsin's Clean Water Act (CWA) monitoring responsibilities. The strategy supports our statewide commitment to protecting and improving water quality through monitoring that is structurally integrated with waterbody assessments and management needs across multiple water programs. DNR is going through a process to update and refine previous iterations of our monitoring strategy to build upon the 2015 and 2021 versions. During 2025-2026, the Water Resources Monitoring Strategy Team, comprised of representatives from across all Water Resources districts, sections, and monitoring teams, will lead a process to engage DNR staff in evaluating and assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges associated with our current strategy. This team will then suggest and develop refinements and shifts that the Monitoring program will focus on implementing and improving from 2027-2032. DNR plans to have the strategy finalized by the end of 2026, with implementation of the updated strategy to begin in 2027.

Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)

Per DNR's draft 2022 – 2032 Water Quality Restoration and Protection Prioritization Framework (Vision 2.0), DNR continues to develop TMDLs prioritizing impairments caused by nutrients and sediments. With the submittal and subsequent approval by U.S. EPA of the NE Lakeshore TMDL, DNR initiated its next TMDL development project addressing impairments due to total phosphorus and sediment in the Sugar Pecatonica Basin in southwestern Wisconsin. Below is a summary of ongoing TMDL restoration and protection projects:

Fox Illinois TMDL

Located in Southeast Wisconsin, this TMDL will cover TSS and phosphorus impairments in the Fox (IL) River, the Des Plaines River, and other smaller basins in the region. River, stream, and lake impairments will be addressed. The TMDL addresses impairments caused by total phosphorus and sediment evaluating both local water quality criteria and the potential impact of downstream TMDLs located in Illinois immediately south of the Wisconsin border (previously approved by U.S. EPA). The Fox River flows into a series of lakes in Illinois that are both listed as impaired for phosphorus and have criteria lower than that of the Fox River and thus must be factored into the TMDL allocation analysis.



Des Plaines River near Highway K crossing.

A multi-year monitoring and data collection effort for the TMDL development process has been completed, as well as watershed modeling. Draft wasteload and load allocations are currently being reviewed and provided to

stakeholders for input. In addition, DNR is finalizing a draft TMDL report for stakeholder input. DNR is targeting late summer or fall of 2026 for submittal of the TMDL to U.S. EPA.

Lake Pepin TMDL

Lake Pepin is located along the Mississippi River bordering Wisconsin and Minnesota and has water quality impairments stemming from total phosphorus. This TMDL will address total phosphorus reductions needed to meet water quality criteria for Lake Pepin and its contributing waterbodies in Wisconsin. Lake Pepin and two small Wisconsin streams that drain directly to it, Lost and Bogus Creeks, are listed on Wisconsin's 303(d) list as impaired due to excessive phosphorus, which leads to nuisance algae growth, oxygen depletion, fish kills, reduced submerged aquatic vegetation, water clarity problems, and degraded habitat. This TMDL is designed to complement the TMDL prepared by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) for Lake Pepin by addressing Wisconsin's portion of the Lake Pepin basin. MPCA's TMDL report, "Lake Pepin and Mississippi River Eutrophication Total Maximum Daily Load Report" was approved by U.S. EPA on May 19, 2021, and can be found on MPCA's website. In reviewing the MPCA TMDL, DNR considered additional data affecting allocations and loadings for the watersheds in Wisconsin that necessitated an update to the analysis. Wisconsin DNR has conducted new watershed modeling incorporating the necessary wasteload allocations and refining the load allocations and reductions identified in the MPCA TMDL to cover the Wisconsin portion of the Lake Pepin drainage basin. DNR also worked with an U.S. EPA funded contractor to refine the load allocations, develop edge of field targets to aid agricultural implementation, and identify critical areas and fields that could be prioritized for nonpoint implementation. The TMDL allocations and report have been completed and are slated for public notice and submittal to U.S. EPA in early summer of 2026.

St. Louis River Watershed and Estuary TMDL

DNR is providing technical support and modeling review to MPCA for the development of a mercury TMDL for the St. Louis River and Estuary. The TMDL will determine the mercury reductions needed for lakes and rivers in the St. Louis River watershed to meet the water quality standard for mercury and support healthy consumption of fish. Mercury is toxic to humans; people can be exposed to mercury when eating fish pulled from waters with mercury contamination. MPCA is undertaking this TMDL study for many reasons, including the cultural and economic importance of fishing in the watershed and the exercise of tribal treaty rights. The St. Louis River forms part of the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin and both states have a shared interest in addressing the mercury impairments.

Sugar-Pecatonica Basin TMDL

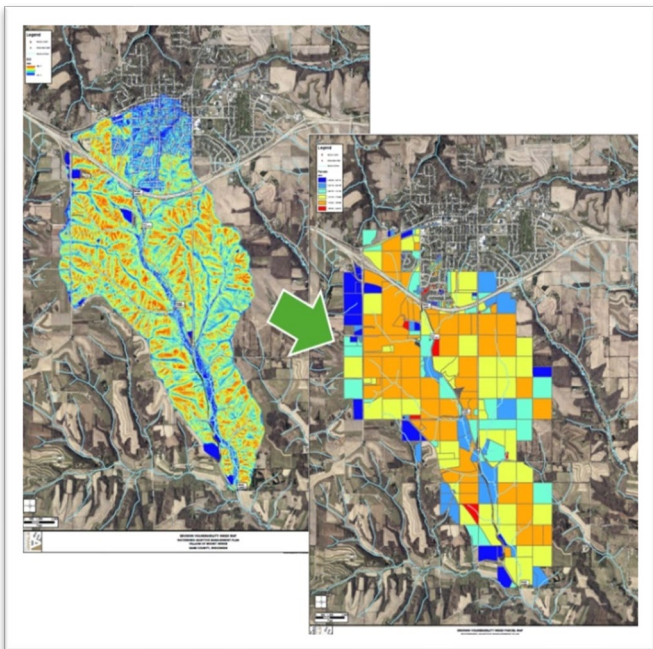
The Sugar River is a tributary to the Pecatonica River, and together they form the Sugar-Pecatonica Basin. These waters are located in the southwest portion of Wisconsin in the Driftless Area of the state, an area not covered by the last glacier. Farming occurs on the ridgetops or in the stream valleys with the region's steep hillsides often left wooded. Streams in the Driftless Area have a higher gradient than those in other parts of southern Wisconsin. Agriculture predominates land use in the basin, with urbanizing areas closer to Madison. Besides portions of the city of Madison, larger municipalities in the basin include Verona, Monroe, parts of Fitchburg, Mt. Horeb, Dodgeville and Darlington. The proximity to major population centers often places heavy pressure on aquatic and water-related resources. While water quality in the Grant-Platte/Sugar-Pecatonica basin is generally fair to good, the primary water quality problems are the result of nonpoint sources of pollution, particularly from agricultural operations and urban runoff. A TMDL is being developed to protect high quality waterbodies and address impairments caused by total phosphorus and sediment with current work emphasizing the collection of additional water quality data over the next two to three years to support subsequent watershed modeling efforts and to better quantify water quality stressors. TMDL watershed modeling is slated to be initiated in mid to late 2027.

Adaptive Management

Adaptive management is a phosphorus compliance option that allows point and nonpoint sources (e.g. agricultural producers, storm water utilities, developers) to work together to improve water quality in those waters not meeting phosphorus water quality standards. Landowners, municipalities, and counties work within their watersheds to target major sources of phosphorus runoff. If successful, point sources can avoid costly treatment upgrades while helping achieve greater water quality outcomes and landscape-level benefits.

Statewide, adaptive management plans target over 239,000 lbs/year of nonpoint phosphorus reduction.

Throughout the 2024-2025 biennium, 21 Wisconsin Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (WPDES) permittees continued to implement adaptive management efforts in their local watersheds. DNR approved two new adaptive management plans in 2024. The Village of Mount Horeb is working to restore a 3,800-acre headwaters catchment of the Sugar River. Situated on the periphery of the state's Driftless Region, the watershed is characterized by steep slopes, dendritic drainage patterns, and heavy agricultural use. The Village will partner with Dane County Land & Water Resources Department and the Upper Sugar River Watershed Association to promote adoption of continuous cover and barnyard/feedlot BMPs. The plan estimates that 695 lbs/year of phosphorus reduction will achieve water quality goals.



Mount Horeb's adaptive management plan employs DNR's erosion vulnerability assessment tool to rank agricultural parcels for outreach priority.

The City of Waupun is employing a combination of advanced biological nutrient removal (ABNR) technology and partnerships with agricultural producers to achieve targets set by the Rock River TMDL. Throughout the early 2020s, Waupun worked to install a novel, algae-based nutrient recovery system at their wastewater treatment facility. While the technology shows the potential for sustainably achieving ultra-low phosphorus effluent limits, performance challenges arose during early operation of the system. Waupun has pivoted to a two-pronged compliance approach that employs agricultural partnerships and nonpoint phosphorus reductions to obtain operational flexibility for the wastewater treatment system.



Applied Technologies Inc. staff evaluate the photobioreactor's operating conditions inside the greenhouse which contains the ABNR system.

All permittees engaged in adaptive management monitor the receiving water to track implementation progress, which is reflected in monitoring requirements found in the WPDES permit. New partnerships between municipalities, agricultural producers, and environmental organizations have formed around adaptive management, as common restoration interests bring resources to the table to achieve common goals.

Water Quality Trading

Water Quality Trading (WQT) may be used by WPDES permit holders to demonstrate compliance with water quality-based effluent limits. Generally, water quality trading involves a point source facing relatively high pollution reduction costs compensating another party to achieve a less costly pollution reduction with the same or greater water quality benefit. In other words, water quality trading provides point sources with the flexibility to acquire pollutant reductions from other sources in the watershed to offset their point source load so that they will comply with their own permit requirements. In Wisconsin, stringent phosphorus and TSS limits drive interest in WQT. Agricultural sources of phosphorus and TSS are prevalent in many Wisconsin watersheds. As such, the majority of trades involve nonpoint source pollutant reductions.

Statewide, WPDES permittees and their consultants, along with the statewide WQT Clearinghouse, are continuing to establish relationships with credit generators. Through quantification of nonpoint source pollution offsets and significant cost savings for permittees, WQT is emerging as a significant ecosystem services marketplace within Wisconsin. At the conclusion of 2025, over 80 permittees had a WNR-approved water quality trade for compliance with phosphorus limits.

A new water quality trading partnership for the 2024 – 2025 biennium is the Watertown Waterways Improvement Program. This program ultimately seeks to supply phosphorus and TSS credits to the Watertown Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) for the purposes of meeting wasteload allocations under the Rock River TMDL. Local farms will benefit from an array of practices including filter strips and grassed waterways. The Rock River Coalition and Jefferson County Land and Water Conservation Department are key partners. Agricultural practices as an alternative to traditional MS4 solutions (detention basins, treatment devices, etc.) will yield equivalent or better environmental outcomes at a fraction of the cost.

Projects designed to reduce nonpoint source pollution for WQT purposes provide several ancillary benefits. A commonly employed WQT practice, conversion of fields from high-intensity agriculture to perennial prairie vegetation, may also provide atmospheric carbon sequestration, habitat for insects and wildlife, and improve hydrology. Pollutants other than the traded pollutant, such as nitrogen and sediment, may also be kept from entering waterways. Projects occurring in years 2024 and 2025 restored hundreds of acres of perennial vegetation and resulted in adoption of lower-impact agricultural practices (e.g. cover crops, no-till, or nutrient management). Five water quality trades restored eroding streambanks, stabilizing over two miles of streambank in total. In-stream habitat benefits also stem from WQT practices,

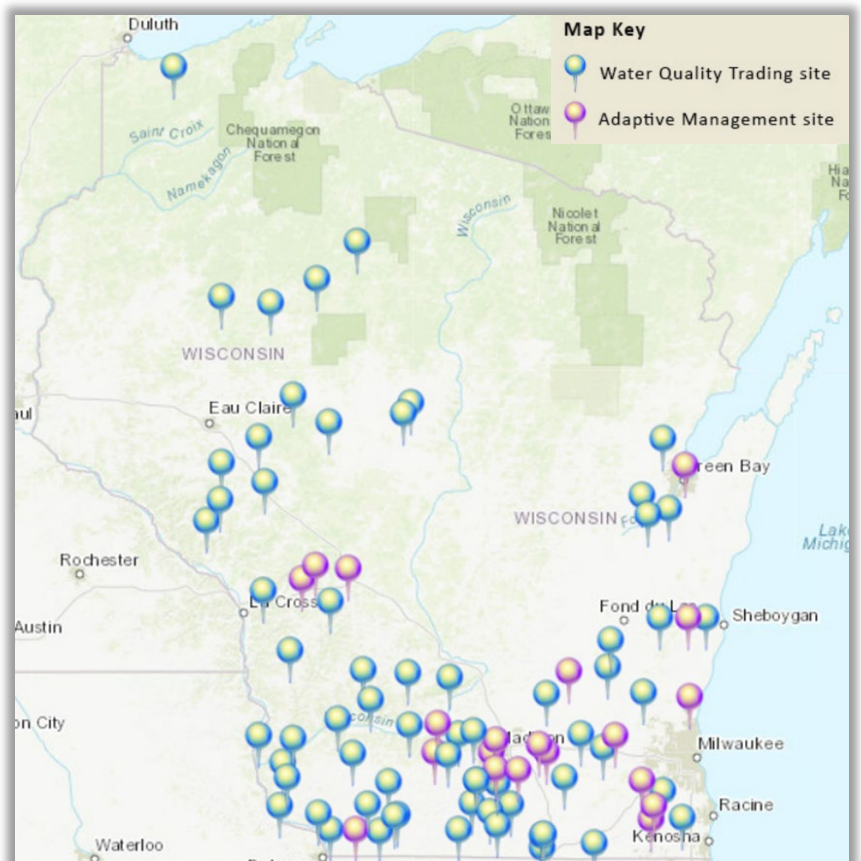


Figure 12. Locations of Adaptive Management Plans and Water Quality Trading sites across the state as of 2024.

particularly those that reduce sediment loading to waterways. Several WQT projects employed in-stream habitat restoration practices to further mitigate the effects of excess sediment in the system.

The provisions of all water quality trades are incorporated into the discharger's WPDES permit, with a monthly accounting process for the use of pollutant credits. All nonpoint source best management practices are inspected regularly and conform to a NRCS or DNR performance standard. Many wastewater dischargers throughout Wisconsin look to WQT for long-term compliance solutions. These nonpoint source pollution control efforts leverage new partners and funding to address runoff issues.

Water Quality Management Planning & Watershed Assessments

Wisconsin's water quality management planning program continues the tradition of Clean Water Act plans from the early 1970s that identified priorities for federal funding under the State Revolving Grant Program. Local water quality planning is integrated with Targeted Watershed Assessment (TWA) monitoring projects and statewide initiatives like Healthy Watersheds, High-Quality Waters (HWHQW).

Targeted Watershed Assessments

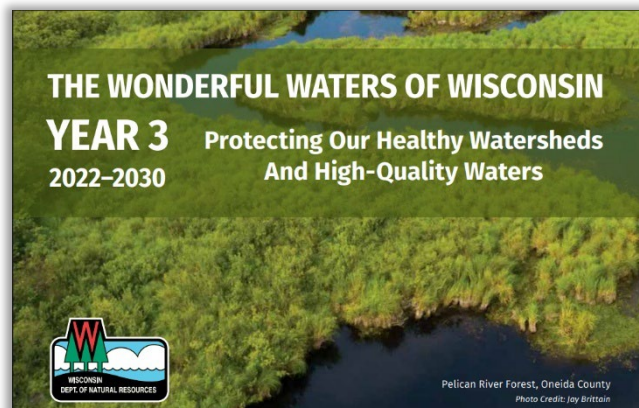
Targeted Watershed Assessment Projects often inform watershed planning efforts such as US EPA Nine Key Element Plans, DNR Water Quality Planning, or NRCS National Water Quality Initiative. County conservation agencies and local coalitions work with the department to identify areas with impaired waters, and in recent years, HWHQW watershed protection priorities. Areas with runoff grants that fund best management practices (BMPs) are a high priority for DNR monitoring efforts. Pre- and post-installation monitoring of BMPs provide science-based "snapshots" of resource condition before and after restoration activities. Water Quality Plans conducted pre-implementation can recommend specific BMPs that would address conditions found on the landscape.

In 2024 and 2025, DNR staff started or completed TWA monitoring projects in the Upper Yellow River, Upper Tamarack, Belle Fountain, Chemical Creek, Bear Creek, Middle Branch Embarrass River, Scarboro Creek, Renard Creek-Sugar Creek, Ames Branch of the Pecatonica River, Lower Wisconsin River backwaters monitoring, North Branch of the Milwaukee River, Ashippun River, Webster Brewer Creek, Little La Crosse Watershed, Little Lemonwier, and Four Mile Creek

Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin

To draw attention to the state's finest waterbodies, the DNR's Water Quality Program launched the Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin (WWOW) initiative in 2022. This new focus on "already healthy" waterbodies and watersheds is intended to celebrate these treasures and provides a road map for how to strike an improved balance between restoration and protection. The Wonderful Waters of Wisconsin Action Plan (2022) includes actions suggested by a majority of partner groups, including businesses, lake, river, and watershed groups, local units of government, and fish and wildlife conservation organizations.

Partners will work together through 2030 to implement specific strategies with a goal of keeping 100% of the watersheds prioritized for protection, and the high-quality waters within them, healthy. These geographic protection priorities were identified through the 2021 modeling



Wisconsin's Action Plan to keep 100% of the watersheds identified as priorities for protection--and the high-quality waters within them—healthy through 2030.

and assessment effort, also known as Healthy Watersheds, High-Quality Waters (HWHQW). The HWHQW data can be explored through ready-made maps, information dashboards, and mapping tools available on the DNR's webpage.

The [2025 Progress Report](#) describes accomplishments during year three of this exciting initiative. Ongoing Action Plan implementation efforts include linking WWOW to monitoring projects and local and regional planning efforts, creating alternative watershed-based planning guidance for protection, and expanding grant funding eligibility and review/ranking criteria for HWHQW projects.

In 2026, the DNR will complete the first update of the High-Quality Waters list which was originally published in 2021. The DNR aims to update the High-Quality Waters list every two years in accordance with the Clean Water Act assessment cycle.

Conclusions

With bountiful water resources, over 5 million residents, and up to 112 million annual visitors, the State of Wisconsin works diligently to protect water quality, biological integrity, and recreation opportunities. The Water Condition Lists are a first step in managing Wisconsin's waters, determining if protection or restoration is required. Monitoring was conducted across the state, resulting in new pollutant listings and delistings. The majority of new listings were based upon high levels of phosphorus and bacteria. There were 16 listing removals for seven different parameters. A total of 137 waters were newly assessed and determined to be on the Waters Attaining Standards List.

Guided by the DNR mission, staff continue to complete critical planning, monitoring, restoration and protection work for the public waters of the state, working across departments and alongside partners and volunteers. In 2024 volunteers gathered water quality data for almost 900 sites (CLMN program) and over 500 stream sites (WAV program). DNR staff collected long-term trend and project data across the state, including starting or completing more than one dozen Targeted Watershed Assessments. This year, DNR staff also initiated an update of Wisconsin's Water Quality Monitoring Strategy to find efficiencies, leverage new technologies, and respond to changing data needs of programs and the public. TMDL staff also made impressive progress: the Fox-Illinois TMDL will be submitted to EPA in fall 2026 and allocations for the Lake Pepin TMDL will be submitted this summer. Two new Adaptive Management plans were approved for the Village of Mount Horeb and City of Waupun, as well as a new water quality trading partnership with the City of Watertown. The Clean Water Fund Program, Safe Drinking Water Load Program, and Surface Water Grants Program continue to directly impact the lives of Wisconsinites by providing financial assistance for pollution abatement, drinking water infrastructure, and surface water protection and restoration.

Taken together, the data and activities reported herein demonstrate Wisconsin's commitment to a future of clean, available water resources for the citizens of the state, present and future.

Complex Figure Descriptions:

Figure 1

Overview: The chart shows the amount of assessment units attaining and not attaining standards for each common parameter type. Fish has the most assessment units of either category, followed by total phosphorus, then macroinvertebrates, then chlorophyll-a, then macrophytes, then chloride, then temperature, then E. coli. All common parameter types have more assessment units attaining standards than not attaining standards.

Data: Fish (1969 assessment units attaining standards, 379 assessment units not attaining standards); Total Phosphorus (1172 attaining, 614 not attaining); Macroinvertebrates (1264 attaining, 130 not attaining); Chlorophyll-a (681 attaining, 184 not attaining); Macrophytes (640 attaining, 184 not attaining); Chloride (721 attaining, 77 not attaining); Temperature (497 attaining, 142 not attaining); E. coli (106 attaining, 95 not attaining).

Figure 2

Overview: The pie chart shows the number of assessment units on each conditions list. The majority of assessment units are on the Attaining Standards List, followed by the Impaired List, and then the In Restoration List.

Data: Attaining (8010 assessment units, 81%); Impaired (1325, 13%); In Restoration (561, 6%).

Figure 3

Overview: This is an aerial map of Wisconsin, with its state border outlined in grey. Portions of surrounding states and Great Lakes can be seen as well with their borders in grey. Waterbodies that are attaining standards are teal blue in color, including streams, rivers, and lakes. Waterbodies attaining standards occur all across the state but are more prevalent in northern Wisconsin. Lake Winnebago, the Upper Fox-Wolf basin, stretches of the Wisconsin River and its tributaries, as well as parts of central and Southeast Wisconsin contain fewer teal waterbodies, indicating that those waters are either not monitored or are on the Impaired Waters List or Waters In Restoration List.

Figure 4

Overview: The pie chart shows the percentage of each pollutant type that makes up all pollutant listings on the 2026 Impaired Waters List. Nearly half pollutants listings are for Nutrients, followed by Toxics, then Metals, then Degraded Habitat, then Degraded Biology, then Bacteria.

Data: Nutrients (49%); Toxics (15%); Metals (13%); Degraded Habitat (12%); Degraded Biology (6%); Bacteria (5%).

Figure 5

Overview: There are four bar charts for five of the pollutant categories found on the Impaired Waters 2026 List. Each chart is in its own quadrant and has different pollutant types listed that are within the chart's pollutant category. Each pollutant type has a corresponding value for how many times it is listed on the Impaired Waters 2026 List. The Metals category is in the upper left quadrant; the majority of listings are for pollutant type Mercury, followed by Metals, Lead, Zinc, Copper, Cadmium, and finally Arsenic. The Degraded Biology and Bacteria categories are combined on the same bar chart in the upper right quadrant. E. coli accounts for the majority of Bacteria listings, followed by Fecal Coliform with only a handful of listings. Degraded Fish/Bugs account for three-quarters of Degraded Biology listings, with Degraded Plants making up the remainder. The Degraded Habitat category is in the lower left quadrant; Total Suspended Solids (TSS) has the most listings in

this category, followed by Temperature, Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD), Degraded Habitat, Low Dissolved Oxygen (DO), Scum/Foam, and finally Flow Modification. The Toxics category is in the lower left quadrant; PCBs has the most listings in the category, followed by Chloride, PFOS, PAHs, Ammonia, Creosote, PFOA, Dioxin, Dieldrin, and DDT.

Data:

Panel one shows metals. Mercury (184 listings); Metals (25); Lead (9); Zinc (7); Copper (2); Cadmium (2); Arsenic (1).

Panel two shows degraded biology and bacteria. Bacteria: E. coli (91); Fecal Coliform (5). Degraded Biology: Degraded Fish/Bugs (74); Degraded Plants (28).

Panel three shows pollutants related to degraded habitat. TSS (97); Temperature (85); BOD (14); Degraded Habitat (7); Low DO (6); Scum/Foam (2); Flow Modification (1).

Panel four shows toxics: PCBs (124); Chloride (88); PFOS (41); PAHs (11); Ammonia (9); Creosote (3); PFOA (2); Dioxin (2); Dieldrin (1); DDT (1).

Figure 6

Overview: This is an aerial map of Wisconsin, with its state border outlined in grey. Waterbodies on the impaired waters list are red in color including streams, rivers, and lakes. Waterbodies not on this list are marked in grey. Major cities are also marked on the map in grey. Large portions of Southern and Eastern Wisconsin are covered in red lines, indicating impaired stream segments. Northern Wisconsin has scattered impaired lakes, but much fewer impaired waters overall. Southeastern Wisconsin around Milwaukee, Racine, and Walworth Counties also appears to have a greater density of impaired waters compared to the rest of the state. Much of the Lake Michigan and Superior shorelines are also colored red, indicating impaired beaches.

Figure 7

Overview: This pie chart shows the percentages of types of impairments on the Waters In Restoration List. Total Phosphorus is the most common impairment and makes up about two-thirds of the total. Total Suspended Solids (TSS) is the second most prevalent pollutant, while all others make up less than five percent of the total.

Data: Total phosphorus (66% of impairments); TSS (28%); Fecal Coliform (3%); E.coli (2%); PCBs (1%); Unknown, BOD, and Temperature all <1%.

Figure 8

Overview: This is an aerial map of Wisconsin, with its state border outlined in grey. Waterbodies that are on the Waters in Restoration List are colored orange including streams, rivers, and lakes. Waterbodies not on this list are marked in grey. Large portions of the Wisconsin River basin in the middle of the state are colored orange. Much of the Upper Fox-Wolf watershed, those waters draining into Lake Winnebago and ultimately Green Bay are also orange. Many of the streams draining eastward into Lake Michigan are also on the Waters in Restoration List due to the recently completed Northeast Lakeshore TMDL. Much of the rest of the state is completely grey.

Figure 9

Overview: This bar chart shows the total number of new impairment listings and whether they appear on the Waters in Restoration or Impaired Waters Lists. Total phosphorus makes up about 40% of the new listings,

while PFOA, *E. coli*, and plants are the next most numerous categories and each make up about 10-15% of the 102 new listings.

Data: Total phosphorus (41 new listings total, 33 are not covered by a TMDL and are added to the Impaired Waters List, 8 are covered by an existing TMDL and added to the Waters in Restoration List); PFOA (15 total, 15 and 0); *E. coli* (16 total, 14 and 2); Plants (14 total, 14 and 0); Temperature (8 total, 8 and 0); Algae (5 total, 5 and 0); Fish/Bugs (3 total, 3 and 0); Chloride (2 total, 2 and 0).

Figure 10

Overview: This bar chart shows the pollutant listings removed in 2026, colored by pollutant category. About half of the 15 total listings removed were impaired due to phosphorus.

Data: Phosphorus (8 listings removed); Temperature (2); Fish/Bugs (2); TSS, Plants, and Algae (1 each).

Figure 11

Overview: This figure shows five maps of Wisconsin, labeled with the years 2021 through 2025, each with the 72 county boundaries outlined. In 2021, a little more than half the counties are in dark blue, indicating participation in that year's Lake Monitoring and Protection Network, and a further third of the counties are filled with light blue, indicating participation in the previous version of the grant program. In 2022 about 60 of the 72 counties are in dark blue, indicating widespread adoption of the LMPN grant program. By 2025 only three counties are not participating in LMPN: Price, Trempealeau, and Pierce.

Figure 12

Overview: this map of Wisconsin shows locations of Water Quality Trading and Adaptive Management projects in 2024. Of the almost 20 Adaptive Management projects, the majority are located in the southern third of the state, especially Dane and Kenosha Counties. The Water Quality Trading projects are also concentrated in the southern third of the state, but are more numerous (several dozen) and evenly distributed in that area. Outside of the southern third, Water Quality Trading also occurs around Fond du Lac, Green Bay, and in West Central Wisconsin.