

WHAT IS LAKE CLASSIFICATION?

(fact sheet #1 of the Shoreland Management and Lake Classification Series)



BACKGROUND

Wisconsin is home to 15,000 lakes of varying types: from massive flowages to small town millponds, from highly developed urban lakes to undeveloped “wilderness” lakes. While the number of lakes is constant, the demand for use of these lakes has increased dramatically. In accordance with the many public demands and expectations, these lakes are used for all kinds of activities including permanent vacation homes, commercial development, hunting, fishing and boating. The primary use of Wisconsin lakes is enjoyment of their natural beauty and solitude. Needless to say, many of these uses can conflict with one another and threaten the quality of the lake experience.

We know from a wide variety of studies and from speaking to the folks who enjoy our lakes and lake shores that over use and over development of lakes can diminish water quality, natural fish reproduction, wildlife habitat, natural beauty and ultimately a positive recreation experience—the very things that people seek out when they visit lakes. While all lakes will suffer from over use and over development, the impacts will vary from lake to lake depending on its type, size, shape, location and other factors. As our population grows and pressures on our lakes increase, we need to decide how to satisfy increasing demand without harming our heritage of lakes.

A POTENTIAL SOLUTION

Resource classification is one of the basic tools used by resource managers. While each lake is unique and deserving of an individual management plan, it is impractical and unrealistic for broad units of government to strive to manage all lakes individually. Classification suggests that it makes sense to place lakes into categories with management strategies best suited to the types of lakes found in each category. For example, lakes can be classified to apply varying shoreland development standards.

Lakes can be grouped based on hydrology, average depth, surface area, shoreline configuration, as well as sensitivity to pollutants and recreational use. This is a rational approach which allows us to manage lakes in a manner which considers the lake’s capacity to support growth and development. The idea is that some categories of lakes are more vulnerable to problems associated with over use or are better suited to some uses than others. In recognizing these differences, a county or other unit of government is in a better position to implement appropriate management.

WHAT DOES LAKE CLASSIFICATION LOOK LIKE?

Following public input and data analysis, a county or other unit of government will likely develop three or more classes of lakes. The following categories describe the general characteristics of lakes which might fall within these classes.

Natural Environment Lakes/Wild Lakes

This category is designed to protect and enhance such qualities as natural beauty, diverse or unique wildlife and excellent water quality. These waters need special care because of their unique natural characteristics and because of their unsuitability for the densities of development and associated recreational uses which can occur under minimum state shoreland protection guidelines. These lakes are usually assigned the most restrictive development standards (i.e. large or clustered lots, deep setbacks, use restrictions).

Intermediate Lakes

These lakes, in spite of considerable shore and surface use, are relatively intact as natural resources. These lakes are managed compatibly with existing development patterns, but with the intent to prevent a transition to higher densities, which would potentially erode existing values. These lakes are generally characterized by light or moderate existing development densities, significant natural resource values, low maintenance fisheries, important wildlife habitat, and moderate sensitivity to shoreland disturbance.

General Development Lakes

These lakes have a high to moderate level of existing development. These lakes may possess the same physical and biological characteristics as transitional intermediate lakes, but due to size and shape and other factors, are more tolerant of shoreland development impacts. In other cases, these lakes are already so highly developed that changes to shoreland zoning are likely to be ineffective. This designation will most likely be assigned the least restrictive set of standards (although not less restrictive than state law). Management strategies for these lakes will be more restorative than preventive in nature.

Several counties in northern Wisconsin are experimenting with lake classification.

A new grant program, initiated by the Wisconsin Association of Lakes and administered by the Wisconsin Association of Lakes and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources with assistance from the University of Wisconsin Extension provides funding and technical assistance for county lake classification projects. Citizens should participate in lake classification decisions that can provide lasting protection of our great natural resources.

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For more information, contact your regional Department of Natural Resources lake coordinator, the Wisconsin Association of Lakes [800/542-5253] or UWEX/UW-Stevens Point [715/346-2116].