

Minnesota's Buffer Law | What does it mean to me as a lakeshore owner?

by Wright County Coalition of Lake Associations

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A landmark Buffer Initiative was signed into law in Minnesota the summer of 2015. The Buffer Initiative will protect Minnesota's water resources from erosion and runoff pollution by establishing 110,000 acres of perennial vegetative cover of 50 feet along lakes, rivers, and streams, and 16.5 feet along county ditches and private ditches in the benefited land area of the ditch system. The DNR will be responsible to map all public waters and ditches that will be subject to buffers by July of 2016.

By November of 2017, 50 foot buffers must be installed on public waters. By November 2018, 16.5 foot buffers must be installed on public ditches and other ditches in the benefited area. Many small streams, headwaters, and ditches aren't "public", and in Wright County it will be up to the Wright Soil and Water Conservation District to identify other areas that will be targeted for voluntary buffer programs. Funds from the Legacy Clean Water Fund have been earmarked to help the conservation districts with this task for the first 2 years.

Enforcement of the Buffer Initiative will be by counties, watershed districts, or the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). Fines up to \$500 can be issued and multiple fines could be issued. "You can't just pay to not have a buffer" said John Jaschke, BWSR executive director.

Q: So, what does this Buffer Initiative law mean to me as a lakeshore owner in Wright County?

A: For most lakeshore owners, the impact will be minimal. The Buffer Initiative considers most perennial vegetation as a buffer—and lawn grass is considered perennial vegetation. However, most lawn grasses are not deeply rooted. Deep rooted native vegetation plantings provide far superior filtration abilities, as well as habitat variability.

The value of buffers has received a great deal of attention and energy in our state and this is the perfect time to reflect on our individual responsibilities as stewards of the lake. Minnesota is a headwaters state. How we take care of our waters is very important. As lake shore owners, we have long standing set-back regulations that affect how and what we can build on our shoreline. Permits are required whenever 10 yards of earth (about 1 dump truck full) is moved or disturbed or if any wetland will be filled or affected. What can we do to provide a better buffer on our highly valued shorelines?

Do you have a "trouble spot" on your shoreline that always seems to washout after a rain? If you have a steep bank that is in a lawn type of grass, are there mini "trenches"? Do you have shoreline rip-rap that seems to need major repairs every spring and constant weeding? These are just a few of the examples of areas that could benefit from deep rooted perennial vegetation---often referred to as a natural shoreline restoration. Shoreline restorations have a multitude of benefits:



- Slows water runoff
- Traps sediment, fertilizers, and pesticides
- Provides food, nesting, and cover for wildlife
- Deters geese from your property
- Reduces maintenance
- Affords beauty

There are numerous resources to help make decisions on a shoreline restoration. A great first step is to review the information the DNR has <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/shorelandmgmt/index.html> . The Wright County Soil and Water Conservation District <http://www.wrightswcd.org> and the Crow River Organization of Water <http://www.crowriver.org> can also serve as a resource. For those who are in the Clearwater River Watershed District, resources and matching grant opportunities are available www.crowd.org .

So, though the Buffer Initiative may not touch a lakeshore owner directly, it is a perfect time to evaluate our individual obligations for meaningful buffer strips on our lake shore.