NOAA
Habitat Blueprint

NOAA Selects St. Louis River Estuary as Habitat Focus Area

The St. Louis River estuary has been selected as a Habitat Focus Area under NOAA's Habitat Blueprint. This is an important step to increase the effectiveness of NOAA's habitat conservation science and management efforts by identifying places where NOAA offices work to meet multiple habitat conservation objectives on a watershed scale.

A Watershed in Need

The St. Louis River runs along the border of Minnesota and Wisconsin, draining into western Lake Superior. The area is a major tourism draw and home to the country's busiest and largest bulk inland port. The estuary includes approximately the last five miles of the river, which includes the port. Current and former industry has left a legacy of toxic substances including mercury, dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, along with extensive habitat alteration and degradation.

Credit: Michael Anderson.

What Can NOAA Do?

NOAA's expertise in flood and weather forecasting, integrated monitoring, habitat protection and restoration, stakeholder education, and coastal management will be an important addition to the restoration effort.

The objectives we have identified in the St. Louis River estuary include:

- addressing loss of fish and wildlife habitat through the funding of targeted restoration projects throughout the estuary;
- rebuilding sport fisheries and populations of aquatic organisms to sustainable levels through habitat protection and restoration;
- climate monitoring to assess impacts on aquatic and nearshore vegetation;
- reducing the risk of flooding through improved planning and water management strategies;
- engaging in social science research; and
- increasing coastal tourism, access, and recreational opportunities.

Heavy equipment removes debris from Radio Tower Bay.

Flooding at Flaxon Creek in 2012. Credit LSNERR.

Collaboration

Multiple NOAA offices join an already active community of partners working on these issues in the St. Louis River estuary. Within NOAA, the National Ocean Service, NOAA Fisheries, and the National Weather Service have begun a number of projects that are expected to yield measurable results in the next three to five years. Other partners in the restoration effort include the Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve, the Wisconsin and Minnesota Coastal Programs, Minnesota and Wisconsin Sea Grants, and NOAA's Sentinel Site for climate monitoring.

Next Steps

NOAA will now develop an implementation plan for the St. Louis River estuary. The plan will include a major focus on fish and wildlife habitat rehabilitation and restoration, along with identifying non-degraded areas in need of protection.

Project Highlight: Radio Tower Bay

The NOAA Restoration Center is in the process of restoring 75 acres of sheltered habitat in Radio Tower Bay in the St. Louis River estuary. NOAA has invested $2.2 million of Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding in this project. We are working with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Minnesota Land Trust.

Historically, Radio Tower Bay was a center for lumber and paper production. The Bay also served as productive spawning, nursery and foraging habitat for many fish including walleye, lake sturgeon, and smallmouth bass. But the bay was impacted by sawmilling debris, which degraded wetland vegetation and lake-bottom habitats used by fish.

Sawmill debris.

Our partners have already removed 146 tons of derelict pilings and are planning to remove an additional 117,000 cubic yards of wood waste. The project will restore lake-bottom habitat, improve fish habitat, and increase recreational fishing opportunities. The overall goal is to help improve the habitat to the point that it will again support robust fish and wildlife populations.