

The State of the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau Basin

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Courtesy of Mark Stephenson

The Lower Black River

*A report by the Wisconsin Department
of Natural Resources in cooperation with
the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau Basin
Partnership and stakeholders*



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For more information about the Basin, visit the GMU (Geographic Management Unit) web page at: <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/gmu/bbt/index.htm>

Thank you for taking the time to read about your public natural resources in the Buffalo-Black-Trempealeau River Watershed. Similar to the goals we've created for ourselves, we challenge you to educate yourself about the outstanding natural resources in this area of Wisconsin and use this knowledge to help protect, manage, and restore this great land.

Dear Reader:

We're pleased that you have taken the time to read the Black- Buffalo-Trempealeau State of the Basin Report. We hope through this report you add to your knowledge of our natural resources and the appreciation of the commitment for environmental protection and resource management by so many people. We challenge you to use this information as a starting point to make a difference in the Black, Buffalo, and Trempealeau River watersheds.

For thousands of years, we have struggled to live in harmony with our natural resources. At times, past generations have, unintentionally, wounded the water resources and landscape of these great river basins. At other times, they have learned valuable lessons about managing and enhancing land and water resources. The time is now and the choice is ours. Will we accept the opportunity and responsibility to restore and protect these valuable resources?

It's likely that you'll be surprised by the number of partners that DNR staff works with to undertake our restoration and protection projects in these river basins. Certainly, this report does not highlight all of the future work activities that will be undertaken in the basins. Most importantly, at the end of each section, you'll find a list of "things you can do" to take an active part in the protection of these precious natural resources.

How fortunate we are to live and recreate in an area of the state with such wonderful and unique natural resources. We welcome your involvement and encourage you to work with us to protect, restore, and manage these waters and lands.

Sincerely,

Dan Helsel
Water Leader

Tim Babros
Lands Leader

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This report can also be found on the DNR website at <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/gmu/bbt/index.htm>

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The data shown on the maps in this publication have been obtained from various sources and are of varying age, reliability, and resolution. These maps are not meant to be used for navigation, nor are they authoritative sources of information about legal land ownership or public access. Users of these maps should confirm the ownership of land through other means in order to avoid trespassing. No warranty, expressed or implied, is made regarding accuracy, applicability for a particular use, completeness, or legality of the information depicted in these maps.

Executive Summary

Priority Goals & Actions

- ➔ Preserving our unique resources
- ➔ Protecting the public's health and promoting safety
- ➔ Improving recreational opportunities
- ➔ Managing watersheds to reduce water quality impacts
- ➔ Discovering integrated management and partnership opportunities

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) prepared *The State of the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau Basin* report with the help of partners like the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau Basin (BBT) Partnership Team. The body of this report is meant to be a “toolbox,” providing background on important issues and acting as a starting point from which citizens can begin to learn more. It provides a history and vision for the basin land and water resources and lists priority goals and actions for the basin. Finally, the plan makes recommendations and sets performance measures for what the WDNR can do to improve the health of ecosystems in the basin.

The main “toolbox” is in “Priority Goals and Actions.” Each priority is divided into more specific sub-sections. For example, the first section, “Preserving Our Unique Resources,” describes more specific subjects such as wetlands and rare species. Each sub-section includes a general description, a recent example from the basin, how the WDNR is working on the issue, and how public can help.

The combined basins of the BBT cover about 3852 square miles of land in West Central Wisconsin. The river basins form a network of rivers and creeks all draining the land south and west into the Mississippi River. Over 3500 recorded miles of waterways in this network provide homes and a fresh water supply to aquatic organisms, fish, and wildlife species, including many that are rare. The broad lower flood plains of these three tributaries merge with the vast bottomlands of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, creating important corridors for migration and dispersal of birds and fishes.

Certain wetlands, forest communities, aquatic habitats, and geologic features are threatened due to changes in the way we live, such as land use, fire suppression, and development. Controlling invasive species is one key to preserving these unique resources, and for this education is required. In addition, our historical and cultural resources, like marker trees and mounds, are also in danger.

Citizens depend on the state's natural resources every day for water, food, safe shelter, and more. They count on the WDNR to monitor activities with those resources and protect them. Prevention of things like accidents and contamination issues is the goal. However, when the environment is threatened, the WDNR must look at the threat in light of how to minimize its impact on the public and the environment in which they live.

In addition to protecting public safety, the WDNR is always working to improve recreational opportunities by doing things like:

- ➔ Improving accessibility of recreational opportunities through boat landings, handicap accessible areas and activities, and parking lots in or near public areas.
- ➔ Enhancing the experience through informational facilities and wildlife viewing towers, fish and wildlife management.
- ➔ Maintaining state trails, parks, and forests, wildlife and natural areas, and fishery areas.

In all, the BBT has a grand total of nearly 100,000 acres of state-

owned public land and easements for recreational use by the public.

For the public's health and safety, recreation, and wildlife needs, it is also vital to protect water quality in the waterbodies of the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau River Basin and across the state. Water quality impacts can include erosion, sedimentation, nutrient loading, thermal fluctuations, dissolved oxygen, and loss of habitat. Each of these can lead to or magnify the effects of other impacts and can diminish stream health and that of the organisms that depend on it.

With issues like water quality and protection of resources, public health, and recreational opportunities, the WDNR has a big job. In the WDNR, a special effort is being made to seek out partnership opportunities, both internal and external. One important partnership is the Black-Buffalo-Trempealeau Basin Partnership Team. This team is made up of local governments, agencies, conservation and recreation organizations, business and industry, and concerned individuals. The team chooses projects based on the needs of the basin and the interests of its members. Since completing a Smart Growth, or land use planning, informational effort, the team has been working on two other projects – a study showing the impact of public land on Jackson County's economy and a plan to protect the aesthetics and wild qualities of the lower Black River. These projects support the efforts of WDNR land and water teams through information, community education, and public support.

In this report, the WDNR water team's efforts in the BBT are planned for a six-year time period with revisions every two years. The primary challenges identified for the basin include:

- ➡ Unauthorized alteration of streambeds and wetlands.
- ➡ Construction site erosion.
- ➡ Poor stream health and the need for habitat improvement.
- ➡ Changing needs of communities for drinking water and wastewater treatment systems.
- ➡ Nonpoint source pollution of surface waters.
- ➡ Lack of education on many natural resources issues.

More detailed recommendations for WDNR activities are found in the section, "Recommendations & Performance Measures." However, a few priorities of the water team to help alleviate these issues include:

- ➡ Educating interested groups on such topics as pond construction, Chapter 30 (waterway and wetland) permitting, dam removal and available grants, construction site erosion, and agricultural runoff.
- ➡ Partnering with local agencies, organizations, and school groups to improve stream health and recreational opportunities on lakes and streams.
- ➡ Encouraging several communities in the basin to pursue lakes planning grants and seek out lake management alternatives as well as recruiting self-help monitoring volunteers to help monitor water quality on numerous waterbodies in the BBT.
- ➡ Working with communities to assess future drinking water and wastewater treatment needs and assisting them in clean ups, changes, and upgrades to their current systems.

By working with other agencies and the public, the WDNR can continue to make headway on issues of safe public water, healthy surface water, excellent recreational opportunities, and more.

A WDNR Fisheries Management stream restoration project on three miles of Pine Creek, a clear hard water tributary to the Buffalo River, will begin in the summer of 2002. Water quality in the stream is impacted by such problems as sedimentation, lack of in-stream cover, severe erosion, and water level fluctuations. The WDNR is partnering with local organizations, including Trout Unlimited and area school groups to restore this stretch of the stream.

A few of the things that the WDNR hopes to accomplish with this project include:

- ➡ Developing partnerships.
- ➡ Improving water quality.
- ➡ Improving recreational opportunities.
- ➡ Enhancing biodiversity.
- ➡ Meeting natural resources goals.