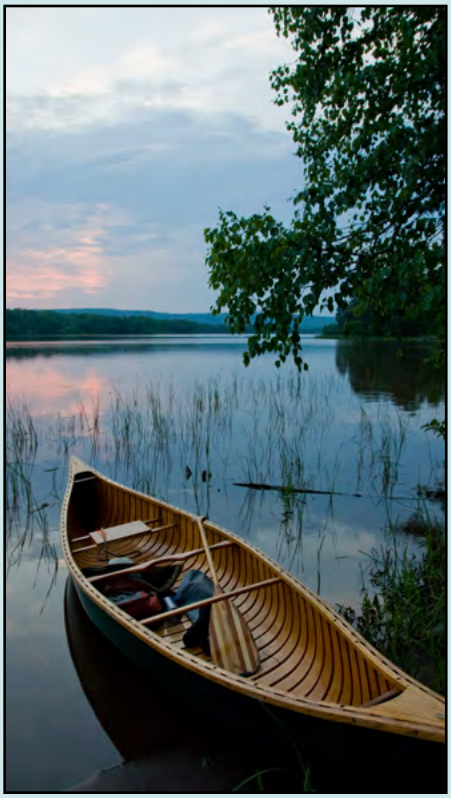
NOAA Habitat Blueprint

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 extends approximately 21.8 river miles, which includes the port. Historically, the area was a center for lumber and paper production and, unfortunately, has a long history of environmental degradation and pollution. Discharges from industrial sites, chemical spills, and other sources have contaminated sediments, water, plants, and wildlife in the estuary, leaving a legacy of toxic substances that include 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 are important components of the ongoing restoration efforts.

NOAA has identified the following objectives in the St. Louis River estuary:

1. Address loss of fish and wildlife habitat through the funding of targeted restoration projects, as well as the delivery of data, products, and services throughout the estuary, particularly to support delisting of the Area of Concern
2. Enhance resilience by reducing the impact of flooding through improved planning and water management strategies
3. Increase coastal tourism, access, and recreational opportunities
4. Provide opportunities for training, education and outreach.

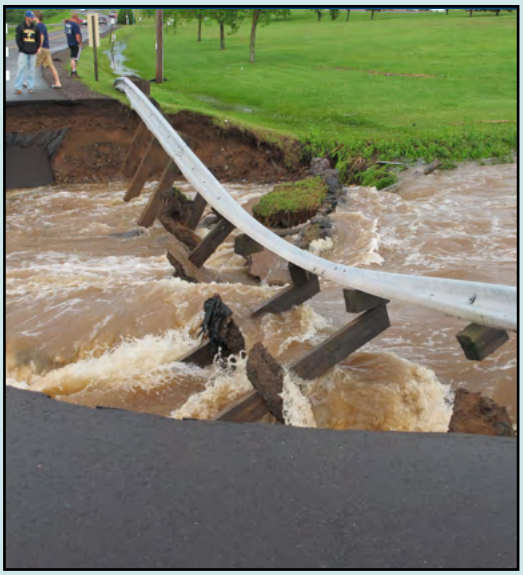
Collaboration

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.

Heavy equipment removes debris from Radio Tower Bay.

Next Steps

NOAA has now developed an implementation plan for the St. Louis River estuary. The implementation plan will improve habitats to the point that they will again support robust fish and wildlife populations, moving it closer to being removed from the list of Areas of Concern while simultaneously enhancing community resilience, increasing tourism, and providing additional educational opportunities in the St. Louis River Estuary.



Flooding at Flaxon Creek in 2012. Credit LSNERR.

Project Highlight: Radio Tower Bay

Sawmill debris

A significant amount of wood debris accumulated in Radio Tower Bay, located upstream in the St. Louis River, as a result of historic saw milling operations that occurred from the late 1880s to the early 1900s. Implementation of this project resulted in the removal of 115,000 cubic yard of wood debris and organic material. 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.