



For Fish and for Forests: the Tullibee Lake Watershed Stewardship Project

June 2014 Snapshots

Minnesota's the land of 10,000 lakes, and included in that number is the largest number of tullibee lakes in the country. Never heard of a tullibee lake? You're not alone, but these lakes, categorized by a specific type of fish that is found in their waters, are one of state's most incredible and undervalued resources. Protecting the watersheds that hold those lakes and the forests around them has become the focus of a new partnership that combines for the first time the strength of state and local government agencies and the commitment of private landowners. The Tullibee Lake Watershed Stewardship Project is taking a unique partnership approach to protection, and the early results are promising.

Many people don't recognize the connection between healthy forests and healthy waters, but the reality is that forests provide protection to lakes in a multitude of ways, including reducing erosion and minimizing runoff. Given that, it's perhaps no surprise that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Private Forest Management Program is the fiscal agent for the project. Combining forces with DNR Fisheries, Minnesota Forest Resource Council Landscape Program, Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) and some private forestry consultants, the project identifies landowners in tullibee watersheds and then provides them with individual forest stewardship plans. The forest stewardship plan allows the landowners to be eligible for financial incentives and tax benefits, and in return the state is able to provide clean water protection in these vital watersheds.

The DNR has enlisted SWCDs because of their close working relationships with private landowners to help with the process. Landowners are eligible for cost-share assistance through BWSR for practices like tree planting and erosion control.

"So much of these forests are found on private land," said Gary Michael, DNR Cooperative Forest Management Supervisor and project lead. "Using this partnership network, we are able to involve more landowners in these protection efforts."

Michael estimates that 30,000 acres have been included in the program so far. The goal is to provide 75% protection of forests around these critical watersheds to make sure these lakes continue to be the high-quality habitat these fish need to thrive.

BWSR conservationist Dan Steward is enthusiastic about the possibilities.

Meet the Tullibee:



Also known as: cisco, lake herring

Habitat: requires cold, well-oxygenated water, primarily lives in deep lakes throughout Minnesota.

Tullibee are found in refuge lakes, of which there are 176 in Minnesota. Tier 1 lakes are deep and clear enough to sustain these fish even when the climate warms. Tier 2 lakes are not as deep, but still afford these fish adequate protection from climate change.

Favorite food of: walleye, northern pike, muskellunge and lake trout.

Known as a "canary in a coal mine" species because the presence of Tullibee in a lake is generally a strong indicator of the lake's overall quality and health.

“This approach - leveraging the strengths of each partner to make for a stronger outcome – is an exciting model for future conservation work. A lot of different organizations have come together to make a difference for the whole state, and we’re just scratching the surface.”