



American Rivers

Thriving By Nature

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2009

#10 Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway

Minnesota and Wisconsin

Threat: Loss of Wild and Scenic River Protections

SUMMARY

The Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway provides a rare natural retreat in a growing urban area. It is a favorite destination for boaters, anglers, and families seeking a natural, outdoor experience. Recreation dollars provide a healthy boost to the regional economy. But the state-managed section of this Wild and Scenic gem is in danger. Short-sighted zoning decisions along a 26-mile stretch of this protected river threaten to damage the very qualities that make the river so special and appealing to residents and visitors. Minnesota and Wisconsin must renew their commitment to the Lower St. Croix and work with riverfront counties, municipalities, and townships to ensure development is responsibly planned, so that the river remains protected for future generations.

THE RIVER

Rising in northwest Wisconsin, the St. Croix River flows 164 miles south to the Mississippi River, ending its journey southeast of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The river drains approximately 8,000 square miles and forms nearly a third of the Minnesota-Wisconsin state border. The Upper St. Croix River was one of the first eight rivers added to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System by Congress in 1968. Four years later, the lower 52 river miles were protected as the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway due to its special natural, recreational, and cultural assets. Wisconsin and Minnesota were entrusted joint protection of the 26-mile segment south of Stillwater, MN and Houlton, WI.

The state-managed segment of the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is the most heavily used stretch of the river. Surrounded by wooded bluffs and historic towns, the Lower St. Croix River corridor provides a wealth of scenic views and recreational opportunities for the nearby Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area and western Wisconsin. Hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors enjoy fishing, swimming, and boating in the St. Croix every year, and these recreational industries depend on a clean, healthy river.

Although the St. Croix River lies less than forty miles from Minneapolis-St. Paul, its sloughs, backwaters, and braided streams provide remarkably diverse habitat for native plants and animals, including 17 species of endangered mussels. It has been called one of most biologically diverse rivers in the Upper Mississippi River basin.

THE THREAT

The state-managed segment of the Lower St. Croix River is threatened by unfortunate zoning decisions by local governments, made without effective oversight by the Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Natural Resources (DNRs). Pursuant to the Congressional designation of the Lower St. Croix Scenic Riverway, the states committed to review zoning decisions that affect the river's unique values. However, over time, the states have allowed several of the 19 local governments along this protected stretch of the river to build large structures too close to the river, degrading the experience of boaters and anglers, and disregarding the intent of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Denmark Township in Washington County, MN approved a 3500-square-foot structure just 13 feet from the riverbank, where the zoning standard is 100 feet. Lakeland, MN approved a major building expansion too close to the riverbank. In Wisconsin, the town of Troy has relaxed its zoning rules without state objection, lessening protection for the river. This erosion of protections hurts the integrity of the Lower St. Croix Scenic Riverway and threatens the Wild and Scenic Rivers System as a whole.

According to state and federal estimates, the population within the St. Croix River basin could increase by almost 40 percent by 2020. If safeguards are not in place, development may continue to encroach on the Scenic Riverway. And a changing climate will multiply the impact of poor land-use decisions. The region will likely experience more runoff from extreme storms, some of the highest summer temperature increases in the country and a subsequent decline in water quality. Riverside forests and wetlands will be essential for their ability to absorb rainfall, prevent erosion, minimize increases in water temperatures and maintain clean water. That is why protecting the natural corridor along the Lower St. Croix is important now, and will be even more important in the years to come.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

In 2004, Wisconsin decided to no longer exercise its authority to intervene in local zoning decisions. Minnesota retains this authority, but rarely applies it. The Wisconsin DNR must reestablish its oversight of local zoning decisions that affect the unique qualities of the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. The Minnesota DNR must strengthen its oversight. Both state agencies must request that local riverside governments establish moratoriums on zoning variances for development projects within or adjacent to the river boundary during 2009-10. Such an action would set a new tone in protection for the Lower St. Croix River. The DNRs must also work with these communities to improve -- not weaken -- specific zoning standards to protect the river and the greater good of all users of the National Scenic Riverway. Specific provisions include setbacks, building height and mass limits for structures and less invasive landscaping and tree removal. Likewise, local governments along the Lower St. Croix should support and help fund

conservation easement programs that encourage riverfront landowners to protect riverside lands.

CONTACT INFO

Dan McGuiness Executive Director, St. Croix River Association, 651-260-6260,
info@stcroixriverassociation.org

Caitlin Jennings, American Rivers, 202-347-7550, cjennings@amrivers.org