



# NEWSLETTER

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Vol.41 No. 1 March 2026

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## OPA MISSION

"The OPA is dedicated to preserving and enhancing the water quality and ecological health of Lake West Okoboji and the Iowa Great Lakes Watershed."

## OUR GOALS

- To protect and monitor water quality, including the threat of invasive species.
- To preserve and protect the wetlands in the Iowa Great Lakes watershed.
- To participate in the control of lake development where a threat to the aquatic and shoreline environment exists.
- To promote sustainable urban and agricultural developments to protect the ecological balance of the lake and its watershed.
- To inform the community of ecological concerns of the OPA and courses of action to be taken.

# PRESIDENT'S CORNER

As I write my first President's message for the Okoboji Protective Association, I'm filled with gratitude and a deep sense of shared opportunity. It is an honor to serve an organization with such a proud history of protecting and enhancing West Okoboji and the broader Iowa Great Lakes watershed. Our members care deeply about these places, and I am committed to working alongside you to ensure our lakes are healthy for generations to come.



**Good stewardship and good fishing** - From November through February, OPA was proud to partner with the Iowa Great Lakes Fishing Club (IGLFC) to keep trash off the ice during ice-fishing season (which ended abruptly in February due to warm weather and rapidly changing ice conditions). Together, we promoted a shared conservation message: enjoy the fishing but leave no trace. Our teams helped with lakeside signage, waste disposal, and communications, and we saw a positive response from anglers committed to keeping the lakes clean. Special thanks to IGLFC for leading this project!

**Celebrate the OPA at West O Brewing** - On Thursday, May 7, from 6 to 8 p.m., our friends at West O Brewing will be celebrating OPA! Join us at the taproom for good stewardship and cheer. West O is generously donating a portion of that day's proceeds to OPA. We appreciate the support! More details are available in this newsletter.

**Save the date for OPA's 2026 Annual Meeting** - The 2026 OPA annual meeting will be at the historic Gull Point State Park Lodge on Friday, June 19, starting at 5:30 p.m. Please join us as we celebrate the past year's accomplishments, learn about upcoming projects, and present the 2026 Ace Cory Award for Conservation.

**2026 strategic priorities** - Over the past 3 months, the OPA Executive Team has been diligently working on our next budget and discussing strategic goals for the remainder of 2026. Budget development is more than a financial exercise; it is a statement of OPA's values. We are carefully aligning resources with OPA's core objectives and examining how to deploy funds to produce measurable results while maintaining fiscal discipline.

In parallel, we are refining two key priorities for presentation to the OPA Board of Directors this spring. **First, this summer, we are refreshing our website.** Our current site has served us well, but it can be improved to better advance OPA's mission and support our members. Excellent communication and engagement are essential to our watershed's future.

**Second, we want to strengthen relationships with our local elected officials.** Land-use decisions made today will determine water-quality and habitat preservation outcomes decades from now. As development continues in the watershed, proactive planning is critical. We have opportunities to work constructively with city councils, county supervisors, and planning and zoning bodies. By engaging constructively, we can help shape policies that safeguard the lakes while respecting property owners and community vitality.

**Things Okoboji has given me** - Every spring, I look forward to bluegill fishing off the dock. I've been doing it my entire life, and I'm grateful to do it now with the 4th generation of my family to know and love West Okoboji. Fishing is one of many priceless things Okoboji has given me, and if you're reading this letter, I know you also

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wKathy Beachem

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have cherished experiences, relationships, and values that Okoboji has given you. Because Okoboji gives so much, I choose to give back through OPA.

If you've already renewed your 2026 OPA membership, thank you! If you've not done it yet, please renew right away! And if you're able and inspired to give more, I hope you will! Spring is a season of renewal. Let's use it to recommit ourselves to OPA and the waters we love!

Sincerely,

Pete DeKock, President of OPA

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## THE DEEP SECRETS OF IOWA'S BLUE JEWELS: 5 REVELATIONS FROM RECENT STUDY

By John Wills, Dickinson Clean Water Alliance

The Iowa Great Lakes Region (IGLR) is the crown jewel of the state's natural landscape, a shimmering expanse in Dickinson County that draws over one million visitors every year. For the families who boat on Big Spirit or dive into the famous cobalt depths of West Okoboji, these waters represent the pinnacle of Iowa's beauty. But beneath the surface ripples, a quieter, more concerning story is unfolding.

Despite their aesthetic splendor, many of these water bodies are officially "impaired." The culprit is an invisible burden of nutrients—nitrogen and phosphorus—that can turn a pristine afternoon at the beach into a battle against algae blooms and murky water. To protect these treasures, scientists spent 2020 through 2024 conducting a massive hydrological "diagnostic" to see what's really happening behind the curtain. What they found is a world where ancient history and modern land management collide in unexpected ways.

### 1. West Okoboji was Born from a Catastrophic "Subglacial Outburst"

We often imagine the Iowa Great Lakes were carved slowly by the patient hands of time. However, the latest geological mapping suggests West Okoboji was born in a flash of geological violence. Roughly 15,800 years ago, a previously unrecognized finger of ice known as the "Okoboji Sublobe" advanced into the region. As this glacier ground forward, it trapped a massive reservoir of meltwater beneath it, forming a high-pressure subglacial lake.

When the ice reached the Milford Moraine, the pressure became unbearable. In a single, catastrophic event, the subglacial lake burst through the ice margin like a failing dam. This "outburst flood" didn't just move soil; it tore through the landscape, creating a massive tunnel valley.

"The unusual depth of the lake is believed to be due to the north to south orientation of the tunnel valley..

and the catastrophic release of a subglacial lake."

This torrent was so powerful it incised through dense glacial till and encountered the ancient **Paleo Iowa River Valley**, an ancestral landscape buried long ago. By excavating these ancient, sand-filled riverbeds, the flood created the unique, deep profile of West Okoboji, ensuring the lake remains deeply connected to the earth's hidden sand and gravel layers to this day.

### 2. In Dry Years, Groundwater is the "Invisible Highway" for Pollution

It's easy to see the pollution running off a field during a thunderstorm, but what happens when the rain stops? Between 2021 and 2023, the region faced a punishing drought. While surface streams slowed to a trickle or vanished entirely, the flow of nutrients into the lakes didn't stop, it simply went underground.

In these dry years, groundwater acted as an "invisible highway," moving approximately 40% of the total nitrate load into the lakes.

### The "Water Budget" Shift During Dry Years (2021-2023):

- **Direct Precipitation:** 39–59% (The primary input, though falling)
- **Groundwater Inflow:** 16–33% (A vital and steady contributor while streams are dry)
- **Surface Water Runoff:** Significantly diminished, making the constant groundwater "drip" more influential.

### 3. The "Deep Secret" Under the Lake Bed

For generations, locals have claimed West Okoboji is "spring-fed." The latest science confirms this is more than just local lore. Evidence now points to a profound connection between the lake and a regional "buried valley" aquifer; a massive body of ancient sand and gravel hidden deep beneath the glacial till.

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Researchers discovered a startling correlation between the water levels of West Okoboji and a Minnesota DNR monitoring well located 23 miles away. The two systems move in such close harmony that it suggests the lake is a "window" into a massive, regional underground lake. This means that the water filling West Okoboji today might have begun its journey miles away in Minnesota. Protecting the lake isn't just about managing the shoreline; it is an interstate mission.

#### 4. Floods Turn the Lakes from "Sponges" to "Sources"

The massive floods of 2024 revealed a dramatic "Je-kyll and Hyde" personality in our lakes. In dry years, the lakes act like a "sponge," capturing and storing nutrients in the floor's sediment. But when the floodwaters of 2024 arrived, the script flipped.

The study identified a phenomenon called "internal cycling." Think of it like beating a dusty rug: the floor might look clean, but a sudden impact sends a cloud of dust back into the air. In 2024, the turbulence of high-volume water resuspended old phosphorus buried in the lakebed. In shallow systems like the Gar Lake chain, the lakes stopped being filters and became "sources," exporting more phosphorus downstream than they received from the land.

#### 5. Nature's Kidneys Are Working (But They Need Help)

The good news is that "Best Management Practices" (BMPs)—like restored wetlands and perennial prairies—are doing their jobs. These "natural kidneys" are highly effective at scrubbing nitrates and dissolved phosphorus from the water before it reaches the Great Lakes. To keep the lakes blue, the report recommends doubling down on conservation in specific areas, where the lack of natural buffers currently leaves the lake vulnerable.

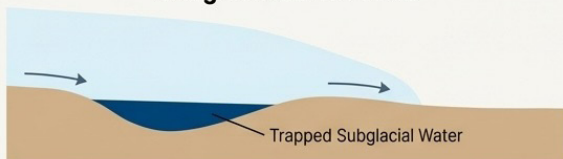
#### Conclusion: A Forward-Looking Reflection

The 2020–2024 study provides us with a new map for the future. It reminds us that these lakes are not isolated pools, but the visible surface of a vast, invisible system that spans across state lines and reaches back to the Ice Age.

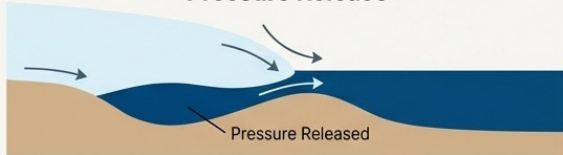
Our management of the soil "above" the surface dictates the health of the ancient systems "below." If we want to preserve the Great Lakes for the next generation of visitors, we must look beyond the immediate shoreline. The health of the water we see depends entirely on our stewardship of the hidden waters and the far-off fields that feed them. After all, in hydrology, there is no such thing as "away."

## A Deeper Story: The Catastrophic Genesis of West Okoboji

### Subglacial Lake Forms



### Pressure Release



### Catastrophic Outburst Flood



### A New Theory

This study proposes West Okoboji was not just carved by a glacier, but by a massive subglacial outburst flood about 15,800 years ago.

### The Flood's Power

The floodwaters cut through layers of glacial till and excavated a deep, pre-existing river valley filled with sand and gravel.

### The Implication

This explains the lake's unusual depth and suggests a hydrologic connection to a regional "buried valley aquifer"—a deep groundwater source that helps stabilize its water level during droughts.

NotebookLM

# LOOKING BACK AT "KEEP IT CLEAN" INITIATIVE

By Steve Weisman, OPA Publicity Director

With the ice fishing season in the rear-view mirror, it's time to take a step back and look at the inaugural year of the "Keep It Clean" campaign for all of us to do a better job of protecting our waters from the refuse that is often left behind.

Spearheaded by the Iowa Great Lakes Fishing Club (IGLFC) in partnership with the Spirit Lake Protective Association (SLPA), the East Lake Improvement Corporation (EOLIC) and the Okoboji Protective Association (OPA), the goal was to attack garbage left on the ice. As a review, reflective 4-foot color signs were placed just on the edge of the ice at 12 prominent lake accesses on Big Spirit, East Okoboji, West Okoboji, Upper Gar and Lake Minnewashta. The message on the signs read **KEEP IT CLEAN - IT'S THE LAW - ICE IS NO PLACE FOR YOUR GARBAGE OR WASTE!**



(photo by Joe Ulman) Pictured is Gary Clausen, who had been out ice fishing. Upon finishing his time on Big Spirit Lake catching perch, he decided to leave the ice with more than his own garbage. In fact, he cleaned the entire area around his fishing area of garbage left by other anglers. Let's all be like Gary!

## A look back

So, how did it go? Captain Greg Harson, Northwest Iowa District Law Enforcement Supervisor for area conservation officers says, "Our conservation officers have commented on how much better things were this winter. Although we gave out other citations for law violations, we gave no citations for littering."

According to Terry Thomsen, president of the IGLFC, "Several things come to mind: (1) The importance of Joe Henry talking to us in 2024 about Minnesota's program and then reinforcing it last summer at OBWF; (2) The willingness of the protective associations to partner with us; (3) The willingness of our board to try something new was important, too. I'd also like to give a huge thanks to Scott Pyle of Boji Custom metalworks, who donated and applied the vinyl signs."

Reflecting on the initiative, John Smeltzer, president of the SLPA, notes, "Collaboration ... this type of effort requires initiation, support, involvement, some \$\$\$ and follow thru. And you can usually only pull something like this off over the 'Long Haul' by having more than one group/individual who is carrying the water. I think we have shown this year that we do. The SLPA took it one step farther and added two big garbage cans for people to use when they came off Big Spirit Lake. Volunteers took off 16 (55-gal trash bags) full of refuse combined from the two areas! That's pretty amazing!"

Lois Clark, president of the EOLIC, shared her thoughts. "East Okoboji Lakes Improvement Corporation appreciates the opportunity to participate in this project. The fishermen are out in front of our house all year. However, I have noticed that on the ice it appears that they have picked up, rather than leaving anything on the ice. When we, as a community work together, we can make good things happen. Keeping the lakes clean is the only way to continue being a destination for the generations to come."

Pete DeKock, OPA president, reflected. "OPA was thrilled to be part of this great project led by IGLFC. This is another example of teams coming together to improve the health and sustainability of the Iowa Great Lakes watershed. I especially want to thank the anglers who did the right thing during this ice fishing season and kept trash from getting in the lakes."

## In the future

All of the leaders talked positively about the future, that this was not a one-year flash-in-the-pan. To all of them, this is about long term and an important initiative to help protect our lakes.

Thomsen said, "We will need to assess how well it worked and what we can do to make it better. An important part would be the ability to put the signs on the ground by the accesses instead of the ice, and we're

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working with the DNR to hopefully get that done. The possibility of porta potties and trash receptacles at all access sites might be something to talk about. Might be hard to evaluate the effectiveness of the radio spots and maybe we spend that money elsewhere. The signs are paid for and that will be a one-time expense so if all groups commit the same money next year, we might be able to other things like the bathrooms or trash containers.

According to Smeltzer, "First of all, thanks to the IGLFC and particularly Terry Thompson for helping create, organize and implement this effort. In addition, this winter we added Port-a-Pots and garbage cans to Big Spirit Lake at two locations with little additional effort and some additional collaboration from folks willing to step up and assist in monitoring. The Port-a-Pots were arguably a great success. They were serviced once a week and often really needed it...AND the angling community and 'Quality of Water' benefited. On a positive note, there were no significant issues in terms of misuse or vandalism."

In looking toward the future, Clark sees a lot of possibilities, "By working together to keep the waters of the lakes clean, we will preserve the beauty of the area."

According to DeKock, "At OPA, we bring a partnership posture to our work, recognizing that protecting the lakes and keeping the habitat healthy requires many teams working together. The first year of this campaign has been a success, and there are many ways we can improve in year two. We're looking forward to it!"

### Until next year

As an avid ice fisherman, my hat goes out to all of these partners to "Keep It Clean." They are a great example of bringing groups and individuals together for the good of our Iowa Great Lakes!

So many times, I've mentioned that it takes a VILLAGE, and in this case the VILLAGE of individuals worked as a group to work on a very important project. As the leaders mentioned, "Keep It Clean" has had a great start, but they are right that there is still work to do, and it's not over, and it probably will never be over.

Finally, good job to all of those who frequented the ice and took care of their stuff and at times that of others! That's definitely passing it forward!

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## THE OKOBOJI MODEL REVISTED: WATER QUALITY AND OUTDOOR RECREATION ARE WINNING MESSAGES

*By David Thoreson,*

A few years back I wrote this for the OPA Newsletter, "Iowans love the outdoors and would like more opportunities to enjoy the beautiful lands and waters of this great state for recreation, leisure, personal and family health. Iowans work very hard and when it is time to spend that hard-earned income, they witness lands and waters neglected and imperiled by elected officials of this state denying the public the healthy outdoor opportunities which Iowans overwhelmingly support."

Has anything changed since then? Very little. Iowa politicians continue to fail, and fail miserably on the environment, clean water and outdoor recreation. In poll after poll, Iowans continually cite concerns about degraded water quality, growing cancer rates, failing rural communities and lack of outdoor recreational opportunities as major issues in their lives.

Well deserving Iowans have now lost 16 years and over \$2 Billion dollars of funding which could have been directed in addressing these issues in thousands of projects across the state. Instead, the political leadership in the state has doubled down on its industrial agricultural

policies which have left Iowans "knee high in nutrients by the 4th of July."

Iowans seem to have awakened again to the water quality disaster that Big Ag has inflicted upon the state, and the issue has moved to the forefront of the fall midterms. Residents have witnessed family members racked with cancers, farmers and rural communities have seen their wells and drinking water supplies contaminated with nitrates and outdoor water enthusiasts have been continually disappointed by beaches, lakes and rivers despoiled by nutrient pollution, soil runoff and toxic algae growth.

How did we get here? Let's briefly review the journey.

In 2010, Iowa voters had had enough of their representatives' failures to represent the majority wishes to clean up Iowa waters and provide more outdoor opportunities and went directly to a ballot initiative. A new Constitutional Amendment was passed with a 63% majority to create Iowa's Natural Resources and Out-

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door Recreational Trust Fund (IWILL). Iowans voted to tax themselves 3/8th of a cent of sales tax to create the funding to implement the Iowa Open Spaces Plan that had been languishing for over two decades. IWILL would be a dedicated source of funding for clean water, outdoor recreation, soil quality and wildlife habitat.

How did Iowa's GOP leadership respond to the voter mandate? They didn't. And worse yet they showed that they have been "captured" by monied Big Ag interests led by the Iowa Farm Bureau who are adamantly against the mandate of the people and the goals of the outdoor trust fund.

After 16 years, IWILL remains unfunded, and the legislature remains defiant to act on the clear mandate by Iowans. Recent polling shows that over 80% of Iowans "strongly support" funding the trust. Improving Iowa's horrific water quality has remained the number one priority during this time. Statewide, water quality has gotten worse.

Meanwhile, in the Iowa Great Lakes (IGL), we implemented our own version of IWILL long before the great people of Iowa created the ballot initiative. In the 1980's and 90's, local advocates worked to create new organizations like the IGL Clean Water Alliance, Dickinson County Water Quality Commission, Dickinson County Trails Association and The Cooperative Lakes Area Monitoring Project (CLAMP).

These organizations and local lakes protection associations have worked with dozens of local, state, and federal partners (including agriculture) to produce the framework to create what I call the "Okoboji Model." It's Iowa nice in action. In the IGL we kind of throw politics out the window. We work in a very bipartisan manner to accomplish water quality projects, develop high-quality outdoor recreational opportunities, and endeavor to protect sensitive lands and waters in our local watershed.

In essence, this is the IWILL model that we Iowans voted for in 2010, that passed with a super majority of Iowans. What has all this investment gotten Dickinson County and the Iowa Great Lakes?

With citizen volunteers leading the way, CLAMP has collected 25 years of data to show that our committed conservation efforts work. Our water quality is improving. Great water quality attracts new residents, businesses and tourists to Dickinson County. In one of the few growing rural counties in Iowa, the IGL has a \$300 million-dollar outdoor recreational economy. We offer "proof of concept" that an investment in the environment, outdoor opportunities and more public lands can support a local, rural economy.

For one example, the Dickinson County Trails Board just released their 2025 trail use counts for last season. Our investments in trails infrastructure generated 421,000 annual trail users averaging about 2600 every single day. All these people using our beautiful trails spend a lot of money at local hotels, restaurants, shops, bars and entertainment facilities. Our current 60-mile system is now connecting to Clay County and Spencer.

Next, let's also look at one outdoor recreation example at the state level, RAGBRAI. The Register's Annual Great Bicycle Ride Across Iowa generates \$1.4 Billion to the overall Iowa economy in one week, which leaves one astonished and completely baffled. Why can't Iowa's elected leaders capitalize on this low-hanging fruit and declare Iowa the "Bicycling Capital of America?" Trails and cycling are wildly popular. Why not start promoting cycling year-round and invest in connected trails and statewide infrastructure to boost the rural economy? Why not make Iowa a recreational powerhouse by funding the trust?

Outdoor recreation generates \$9 Billion dollars of consumer spending and provides over 80,000 jobs across Iowa. Providing stimulus to give this portion of our economy a boost seems like a no brainer. Across the state, outdoor recreation would add to the economy, create local jobs and keep our youth in the state. Yes, brain drain is real. Our elected representatives must understand that to keep our young Iowans in this state they need to fund healthy outdoor recreational opportunities and improve the environment starting with water quality. Iowans want more to do in the outdoors, not less.

In most of Iowa, land use decisions default almost exclusively to agriculture, expanding Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), row crops and ethanol. Outdoor recreation is hardly on the radar. The result is a false choice imposed on Iowans who must accept poor water quality, and poor health, as outcomes of ever-expanding industrialized agriculture.

But what if state leadership could envision a diverse, equitable and multi-functional landscape that provides a high return on investment from natural resources, public lands and outdoor recreational infrastructure? A healthier vision, and future, for Iowans is one of economic opportunities derived from our natural world, from assets which have not been properly valued. Iowa is a beautiful state, but its full potential has yet to be tapped. The "Okoboji Model" is proof of concept. It is time to grab the low-hanging fruit.

# SPRING RUNOFF — WHY A FULL LAKE ISN'T ALWAYS A CLEAN LAKE

By Mike Hawkins, Iowa DNR Regional Management Fisheries Biologist

After a long winter or a dry season, there is nothing quite like the sight of spring runoff rushing in to fill the Iowa Great Lakes. Seeing the lakes full can be a relief. A full lake means accessible docks, easy boating, and the promise of perfect summer days ahead. It's entirely natural to cheer for every drop of rain and melting snow that makes its way into our beautiful chain of lakes.

However, we need to think more about that water that's headed to the lake. It can carry some things that can cause real problems. Spring runoff acts like a giant power-washer for our entire watershed. As water travels over fields, parking lots, driveways and lawns, it can pick up a heavy load of contaminants.

What comes with the water often includes:

- **Nutrients:** Phosphorus and nitrogen from agricultural fertilizers and residential lawns. To put this in perspective, just one pound of phosphorus can produce hundreds of pounds of algae.
- **Sediment:** Loose soil that turns the water cloudy, buries fish spawning habitats, and carries tightly bound pollutants and nutrients, especially phosphorus.
- **Chemicals and Debris:** Winter road salts, vehicle fluids from streets and yard debris.

When these things wash into the lakes, they become the primary fuel for summer algae blooms, decreased water clarity, and disrupted aquatic ecosystems. The very water we need to enjoy the lakes brings the very elements that threaten them.

You might wonder, doesn't the lake just wash itself out over the summer? The answer lies in the lake's "flushing rate" or the amount of time it takes for a lake's entire volume of water to be replaced by new water.

Because the Iowa Great Lakes are a connected chain, water moves through them differently depending on their depth and volume:

- **East Okoboji Chain and Big Spirit Lake:** Because these lakes are relatively shallow, their flushing rates can be much faster. Water, and the suspended pollutants in it, moves through Spirit Lake in around 5.5 years, while Lower Gar's water flushes in just a few months.
- **West Okoboji:** Because of West Okoboji's much greater depth and volume, its estimated flushing rate is roughly 20 years.

That means the phosphorus, sediment and pollutants that wash into West Okoboji during this spring's runoff won't just flow out of the spillway by Labor Day. They will likely remain in the lake, cycling through the ecosystem and potentially feeding algae blooms, until the year 2046. In West Okoboji, what goes in, stays in for a long time.

This reality makes our mission more important than ever. We can't stop the rain, but we can absolutely change what the rain carries into our lakes. As we prepare for another season, keep these shoreline practices in mind:

- **Native Landscaping:** Deep-rooted native plants and buffer strips along your shoreline act as a natural sponge, filtering out pollutants before they reach the water.
- **Ditch the Phosphorus:** Ensure your lawn fertilizers are phosphorus-free (look for a "0" as the middle number on the bag).
- **Manage Runoff at Home:** Use rain barrels, plant rain gardens and minimize bare, un-vegetated soil on your property. Make sure to pick up pet waste.

The watershed of the Iowa Great Lakes encompasses 110 square miles of land. Although shoreline property protections are important, strategically placed wetland and prairie restoration efforts are also critical. Cover crops, conservation tillage, edge of field practices and other soil conservation efforts on agricultural lands round out the formula for improved water quality.

A full lake is a wonderful thing, but a clean, full lake is our ultimate goal. Steps taken today to keep pollutants out of the lake will pay off for decades to come.



# INHF ESTABLISHES LAKES-AREA STEWARDSHIP DIRECTOR

By Joe Jayjack, INHF External Affairs Director

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is excited to introduce Tanner Bouchard as its first ever Lakes Area Land Stewardship Director.

Tanner's work will focus in and around Iowa's Great Lakes, an area of the state with a long history of INHF protection and restoration projects. Within his 17-county region, Tanner will lead restoration and stewardship efforts on INHF-owned land and partner sites, assist with conservation easement inquiries and monitoring and enhance INHF's community presence.

Growing up in Treynor, Iowa, Tanner enjoyed hunting, fishing and spotting Iowa's wildlife in their own habitats — hobbies he still enjoys today along with spending dedicated time with his family.

Tanner took his love of wildlife to Iowa State University, earning his degree in Animal Ecology. After college, Tanner built a career in Iowa's great outdoors working as a water patrol officer in Okoboji and spending the last six years with Dickinson County Conservation. Now, Tanner says he's excited to bring his experiences and knowledge to INHF.



"I'm very excited to be working alongside like-minded people that care about land stewardship, not just because it's their job, but because it is what they love to do," Tanner said. "I feel like that creates an environment where people are continuing to learn about stewardship practices and aren't afraid to share lessons and practices with each other."

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is a private nonprofit that works statewide to protect and restore Iowa's land, water and wildlife. Since 1979, INHF has protected more 200,000 acres across the state, and more than 7,000 acres in Dickinson County. Working with public agencies, INHF has been a partner in establishing and expanding many of Iowa's beloved parks, trails and wildlife areas.

Recently, incredible community support — including from the Okoboji Protective Association — has allowed INHF to protect areas vital to water quality and wildlife habitat around the lakes including the Narrows Preserve and the Arnolds Park Nature Area.

Tanner can be reached at [tbouchard@inhf.org](mailto:tbouchard@inhf.org) with questions about land stewardship and INHF's work in northwest Iowa.

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## OKOBOJI BLUE WATER FESTIVAL TO END

By Steve Weisman, OPA Publicity Director

Since back in 2016, I have had the pleasure of providing the publicity for the Okoboji Blue Water Festival. Originally founded by the Okoboji Protective Association (OPA), it was designed as a free, family-friendly day to educate the public on the importance of protecting and improving our water quality. Sadly, I just learned this from co-chairs, Greg Drees and Julie Peterson...

*After considerable soul searching, we have made the difficult decision to bring an end to the Okoboji Blue Water Festival.*

*It has been a remarkable ten-year run and truly a labor of love, educating people and raising public awareness of water quality issues in the Iowa Great Lakes. Along the way, we got kids involved also, and they were excited to learn about ways to protect our amazing water resources.*

*We were able to bring the festival free to the public due to a loyal cast of sponsors and volunteers who believed in the cause and gave generously each year with time and fiscal donations. We thank you for your unwavering spirit of giving.*

*To all the festival goers throughout the years, thanks for sharing the vision and filling the Green Space with your exuberance for our event. Please continue to support clean water initiatives in the Iowa Great Lakes!*

# SHARING BOAT PURCHASE QUESTIONS

By Joe Yarkosky, Iowa DNR Conservation Officer

With boating season right around the corner, one of the most common calls/questions that we receive is regarding purchasing boats. Purchasing a boat in Iowa involves navigating a specific set of regulations that differ significantly depending on whether you buy from a licensed dealer or a private individual. Understanding this process is essential for staying legal on the water and can save you a lot of time/heartache in the future.

## Dealer vs. Private Sale:

When you purchase a boat from a dealer, the process is largely automated. Iowa law allows certified dealers to handle the heavy lifting of the registration application on your behalf. In contrast, a private sale places the entire legal burden on the buyer to ensure the vessel is transferred correctly at the County Recorder's office.

## Key Differences in Dates and Deadlines

- **Dealer Processing Window:** Dealers are required to submit your registration and title application to the county within **30 days** of delivery. However, the temporary "placard" they provide gives you a slightly longer grace period for operation.
- **Private Sale Window:** You have exactly **30 days** from the date of a private sale to complete the registration transfer (put it in your name). Missing this window results in a \$5.00 penalty and renders the vessel illegal to operate once the 30 days expire.
- **The 3-Year Cycle:** Regardless of where you buy, all Iowa boat registrations expire on **April 30** every three years. If you purchase a boat mid-cycle, the fee is typically prorated based on how much time remains in that specific three-year period.

## Dealer Advantages: The "Registration Applied For" Placard

One of the primary benefits of buying from an Iowa dealer is the immediate ability to hit the water.

- **Temporary Placard:** Dealers issue a "Registration Applied For" card (often called a temp tag). This placard allows you to operate the vessel for **35 days** while the official registration is being processed. This card shall be placed on the forward half of the vessel in a position so as to be clearly visible at all times.
- **Sales Tax:** Dealers collect the state sales tax at the point of sale, simplifying your visit to the County Recorder.

## The Private Sale Process: Buyer Responsibilities

When buying from an individual, you are responsible for proving ownership and paying taxes. To register a boat from a private party, you must visit the County Recorder in your county of residence with the following documents:

### 1. Bill of Sale

A Bill of Sale is mandatory for all private sales to establish the purchase price for tax purposes. To be valid in Iowa, it must include the following requirements:

- The **date of the sale**.
- The **purchase price** (specifically for the vessel; trailers are taxed separately at the County Treasurer's office).
  - A detailed description of the boat (Make, Model, Year, and Hull ID Number).
- **Signatures** from both the buyer and the seller.

### 2. Current Registration and Title

- **Registration:** The seller must provide the most recent registration certificate, signed on the back to authorize the transfer.
  - **Title Requirements:** In Iowa, any boat **17 feet or longer** must have a title (except for canoes and kayaks). If the boat is titled, the seller must sign the back of the title and provide it to you.
  - **Current Status:** Ensure the registration is current.

## What if I purchase a boat with Expired/No Registration?

In Iowa, if you purchase a boat with an **expired registration**, you are prohibited from operating it on public waters until the registration is brought current and you must undergo the **bonding process** through the DNR to establish a legal "Bonded Certificate of Title." The bonding process begins by submitting a **Request for Bonded Registration** to the DNR, along with photos of the boat and any proof of purchase you possess, such as a bill of sale.

The DNR then conducts a thorough investigation to verify the vessel's history and ensure it hasn't been reported stolen. If the investigation is successful, you may be required to purchase a surety bond from an insurance provider for **one and a half times** the current value of the boat. This bond is held for three years to protect any future legitimate owners; once the bond is filed and

cont.

a DNR officer performs a physical inspection of the vessel, the DNR will issue an approval letter allowing you to finally register and title the boat at your local County Recorder's office.

If you purchased a boat with **no registration**, you are prohibited from operating it on public waters until registration has been issued. First step is to contact a DNR Officer to perform an inspection of the boat. If records/inspection show no previous registrations and it has never been reported stolen, you will be provided an "Affidavit of Unregistered/Untitled Vessel" to take to the County Recorder with your bill of sale to obtain your vessel registration.

As always, please feel free to contact your local State Conservation Officer with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources with any questions. Be safe and have a memorable season on the water.

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## SAVE TURTLE LAKE COMMITTEE LOOKS TOWARD SPRING DREDGING

*By Tim Ireland, Save Turtle Lake Committee*

This spring, the dredge project will move into its most visible and impactful phase as work resumes on Turtle Lake and the connected waterways. With equipment already mobilized and permits in place, crews will begin removing more than a century of accumulated sediment that has reduced water depth, restricted flow and degraded habitat.

As dredging progresses, residents and visitors will see clearer water, improved circulation, and expanding open-water areas. The work will restore depth, improve fish and wildlife habitat and set the stage for the next phases of the Waterway Restoration Project, including Paddler's Path and Wilderness Way.

Paddler's Path and Wilderness Way are two 30-40-foot-wide waterways that connect Turtle Lake and canals to the north to West Lake Okoboji. Currently, both are silted in with sediment and only about two feet deep.

By tackling the sediment now—while an excellent disposal site is available—this spring's effort will help protect the canal system for generations and allow the entire waterway network to function as it was originally intended. At this time, they are accessible by boat during the spring before vegetation takes over. In addition, the shallow, weed-choked water hinders the natural water circulation through the area's canals and Turtle Lake into Miller's Bay, Spencer Beach and Emerson Bay on West Lake Okoboji.

The dredging contractor will operate on a rotating schedule of ten days working on-site followed by ten days off. This approach allows crews to work efficiently during active dredging periods while using off-rotation time for equipment maintenance, logistics and preparation for upcoming phases.

Just as important, the schedule allows workers to return home regularly to be with their families, supporting morale, safety and overall well-being. By balancing demanding on-site work with meaningful time at home, the project maintains a focused, experienced crew while

ensuring steady and high-quality progress throughout the dredging season.

The Waterway Restoration Project depends on continued funding support to move forward once the Turtle Lake dredge is completed. Decades of accumulated sediment have restricted water flow, reduced habitat and limited recreational use throughout the canal system, particularly in Paddler's Path and Wilderness Way.

Securing financial support now allows this work to continue while equipment, permits and disposal sites are already in place, keeping costs lower and momentum strong. Investment in the Waterway Restoration Project is an investment in long-term water quality, public access, wildlife habitat and the preservation of a historic waterway system that serves residents, visitors and future generations.

Tax-deductible donations to support Paddler's Path and Wilderness Way may be made through our fiscal sponsor, the Okoboji Foundation, by visiting

<https://www.okobojifoundation.org/give> and selecting the Waterway Restoration Project fund. You may also contact Tim Ireland directly at **712-229-1450** to discuss the project, funding needs or recognition opportunities.



# OPA NEWSLETTER

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Photo by Lori Eich

## OKOBOJI PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP FORM

Clip and mail this form with your check to: OPA, P.O. Box 242, Okoboji, IA 51355

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Winter Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address to keep you informed: \_\_\_\_\_

You can also donate online at [okobojiprotectiveassociation.org](http://okobojiprotectiveassociation.org)

### **Membership Levels**

- \_\_\_\_\_ \$25 Junior
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$35 Individual
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$50 Family
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$100 Bronze
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$250 Silver
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$500 Gold
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$1000 Platinum
- \_\_\_\_\_ \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Other