

DRAFT AMENDMENT 3
Aquatic Plant Management Plan, Lake Waubesa, Lower Rock River Basin, Dane County
Wisconsin

Approved by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on March 31, 2025

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Plant surveys were conducted by James Scharl of Wisconsin Lake and Pond Resource LLC. for the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department (LWRD).

Introduction

This is a third amendment to the Aquatic Plant Management Plan, Lake Waubesa, Lower Rock River Basin, Dane County Wisconsin, published in December 2011 by the Dane County Office of Lakes and Watersheds. The 2011 plan was approved by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in December 2011. The first amendment to the 2011 plan was approved by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) on March 27, 2014 and by the Dane County Lakes and Watershed Commission on April 10, 2014. The second amendment to the 2017 plan was approved by the WDNR on January 30, 2018. Aquatic Plant Management Plans are required under NR 109.04(d), Wisconsin Administrative Code, to guide mechanical harvesting activities and the effective management of aquatic plants in water bodies.

This plan is prepared in support of Dane County's permit for its mechanical aquatic plant harvesting program, operated in accordance with NR 109 Wisconsin Administrative Code. Individuals and groups that propose herbicide treatments of aquatic plants in Dane County waters would need to go through a separate planning and permitting process with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in accordance with NR 107 WI Administrative Code.

Recent Plant Survey Methods and Results

Dane County contracted with Wisconsin Lake and Pond Resource LLC. to conduct surveys of the aquatic plant community of Lake Waubesa on July 15-17, 2024. Wisconsin Lake and Pond followed current Wisconsin DNR approved protocols and used the point intercept method. The same point intercept maps in the 2011 plan were used for the sampling locations in this survey.

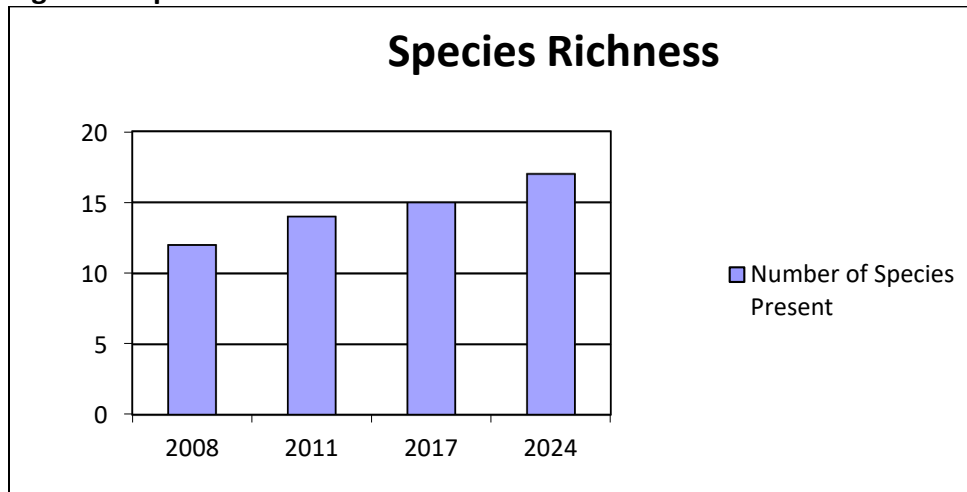
Table 1 below indicates species present during the 2024 survey, and Figure 1 indicates species richness from 2006-2024.

Species richness is a count of the total number of different plant species found in a lake. Generally, the better the water quality the higher the species richness count. Appendix A includes Lake Waubesa plant statistics from the 2024 plant survey. Appendix C includes maps of aquatic plant distributions for Lake Waubesa in 2024.

Table 1. Species present during 2024 aquatic plant survey – Lake Waubesa

Genus	Species	Common Name	Category
<i>Algae</i>	<i>sp.</i>	Filamentous algae	Submersed
<i>Ceratophyllum</i>	<i>demersum</i>	Coontail	Submersed
<i>Chara</i>	<i>sp.</i>	Muskgrass	Submersed
<i>Elodea</i>	<i>canadensis</i>	Common waterweed	Submersed
<i>Heteranthera</i>	<i>dubia</i>	Water star-grass	Submersed
<i>Lemna</i>	<i>Minor</i>	Small duckweed	Free floating
<i>Nymphaea</i>	<i>odorata</i>	White water lily	Floating leaf
<i>Myriophyllum</i>	<i>spicatum</i>	Eurasian water-milfoil	Submersed-Invasive
<i>Potamogeton</i>	<i>foliosus</i>	Leafy pondweed	Submersed
<i>Potamogeton</i>	<i>richardsonii</i>	Clasping-leaf pondweed	Submersed
<i>Potamogeton</i>	<i>zosteriformis</i>	Flat-stem pondweed	Submersed
<i>Stuckineia</i>	<i>pectinata</i>	Sago pondweed	Submersed
<i>Vallisneria</i>	<i>americana</i>	Wild celery	Submersed
<i>Wolffia</i>	<i>columbiana</i>	Common watermeal	Free floating
<i>Potamogeton</i>	<i>crispus</i>	Curl-leaf pondweed	Submersed
<i>Lemna</i>	<i>trisulica</i>	Forked duckweed	Free floating
<i>Spirodela</i>	<i>polyrhiza</i>	Large duckweed	Free floating

Figure 1. Species richness – Lake Waubesa 2006 - 2024



Discussion of historical plant community changes

Definition of terms used in this section

Maximum depth of plant growth is the deepest depth at which plants were found in the lake. This is a function of water clarity. The clearer the water, the better the light penetration and presumably the deeper plants are able to grow. Not all plants grow in deep water some may prefer the shallower parts of the lake, but with clearer water the opportunity to grow deeper is available. Oligotrophic lakes (very clear water lakes) will have some plants growing in waters deeper than 20 feet. Hypereutrophic lakes (the opposite of oligotrophic) are characterized by excessive algal blooms and turbid poor water quality and clarity. Rooted plants are few, and restricted to either unusual weather conditions or very shallow water where light can penetrate. Plant diversity is usually restricted to species that can tolerate poor water clarities. The photic zone is the area where light penetrates enough to support plant growth.

Frequency of occurrence is calculated by taking the total number of times a species is sampled divided by the total number of points at which depth was less than or equal to the maximum depth of plant growth.

The photic zone is the area where light penetrates enough to support plant growth.

The Floristic Quality Index (FQI) is a metric that evaluates the similarity of the flora in a lake to a lake to that of a lake of an undisturbed condition. The higher a FQI value, the closer that plant community is to an undisturbed ecosystem. Just for reference, compare a lake's numbers to the statewide average (24) or ecoregion average (20)(lakes also within the Southeast Glacial Plains ecoregion - see information here <https://dnr-wisconsin.shinyapps.io/AquaticPlantExplorer/>), calculated from a subset of approximately 250 lakes across Wisconsin.

Coefficients of conservatism (C) range from 0 to 10 and represent an estimated probability that a plant species is likely to occur in a landscape relatively unaltered from what is believed to be a pre-settlement condition (see the end of Table 3 in Appendix A). The lower numbers indicate more of a disturbed ecosystem, while the higher numbers indicate a community more like one that would have been found before human settlement. Plant species with a high value are environmentally sensitive to disturbance, species with a low value are tolerant of disturbances.

Lake Waubesa

Prior survey results

During the 2008 and 2011 and 224 surveys of Lake Waubesa, 12 and 14 and 15 species were found, respectively, with coontail being the most prevalent species. There are a few, minor changes evident in the community as a whole and single species abundance.

The aquatic plant community of Lake Waubesa was resurveyed on July 25-26, 2011. For the 2011 plant community, maximum depth of plants remained consistent at 14 feet from the 2008. However, total frequency of occurrence at photic zone sites increased from 52.61% to 63.17% in 2011. Over these sampling periods, the FQI and average coefficient of conservatism (C) both increased. From 2006, the FQI and average C was 16.92 and 4.69, respectively. In 2011, these rose to 17.49 and 5.27. In 2017 frequency of occurrence at photic zone sites increased to 65.74%. The FQI increased to 18.58 and average C decreased slightly 5.15 respectively. Coontail was the dominant plant present during the 2017 survey, followed by Eurasian water-milfoil. Flat-stem pondweed decreased in abundance while water star-grass increased in 2017. Leafy pondweed and sago were found while northern water-milfoil was still not found in the 2017 survey.

2024 survey results

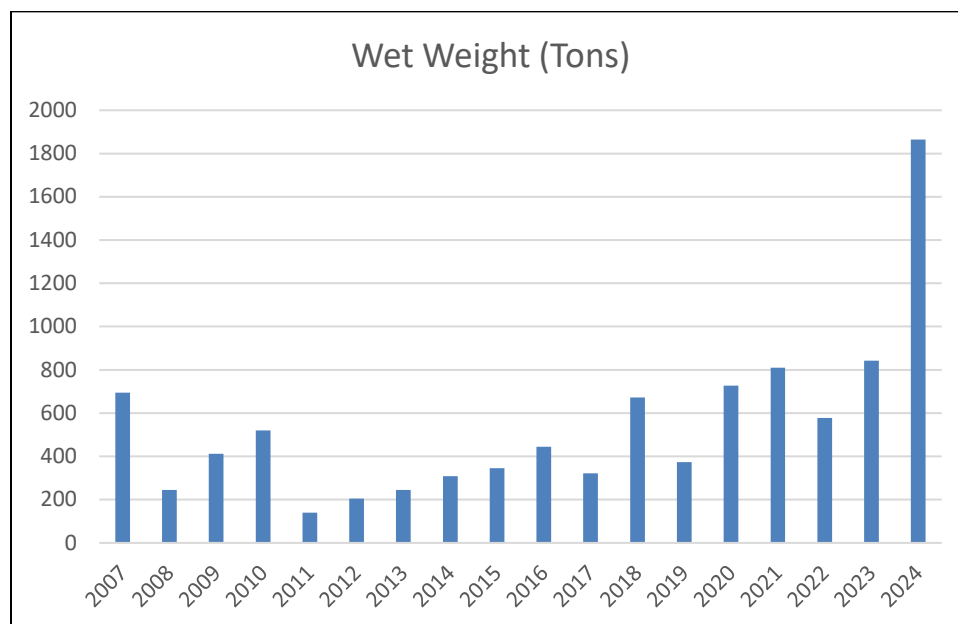
The 2024 survey found 15 different species of plants. Coontail was most dominant species at 86.9% of vegetated survey sites and 73.68 in areas shallower than maximum depth of plants. Eurasian water milfoil was present in 37.47% of the vegetated sites with chara at 21.61%. Frequency of occurrence in the photic zone sites increased to 84.8% from 65.74% in 2017 with the maximum depth of plants at 15.5 feet. The FQI increased to 20.39 and the Mean C was 5.26. While not present in 2017, Curly leaf pondweed was detected in 2024 although only at 0.23%.

Though similar aquatic plant communities were present during each survey, there were still limited changes in species composition between the three surveys. Coontail continues to increase as does chara. Number of plant species has increased as did the maximum depth of plants in 2024. In 2017 maximum depth of plants was only 10 feet but increased to 15.5 feet in 2024. Eurasian water milfoil showed a slight increase but similar to previous surveys. Given the presence or absence of any species should not be a cause for concern as plant communities do vary over time and sampling points may not detect every species present in a given waterbody.

Harvesting Aquatic Plant Management Records

Figure 2 summarizes Dane County's mechanical plant harvest totals in Lake Waubesa since 2007. According to Wisconsin DNR, the last permit granted for herbicide use on Lake Waubesa was in 2011.

Figure 2. Historical Lake Waubesa aquatic plant harvesting records



Public input opportunities

Presentations on both Lake Waubesa and Lake Kegonsa amendments were held on December 2, 2024. The complete draft plans can be viewed on the webpage: <https://lwr.danecounty.gov/what-we-do/lake-management/aquatic-plant-management> Public comment will be solicited until January 31, 2025.

Aquatic Plant Management in Dane County

The overall goal of Dane County's mechanical harvesting program is to cut and harvest nuisance and over abundant aquatic vegetation to help provide for reasonable use of the lakes for boating, fishing and swimming, while preserving the health and balance of the lake ecosystem. During periods of high water, harvesting of plants in the Yahara River between lakes Waubesa and Kegonsa becomes the highest priority to increase the flow in the river by reducing the friction from the plants. This allows improved water level management for the lakes.

Aquatic plant growth varies from lake to lake and year to year. Dane County employs a Plant Scout to evaluate plant growth conditions and recommend appropriate harvesting in response, within the limits of the plan harvesting priority areas and DNR permit. In times of heavy plant growth, local residents often advocate for additional harvesting in their areas, harvesting longer into the season (into the fall), or dedicating a harvester for a particular waterbody. County managers balance staff and harvesting equipment resources and priorities with needs and ecological conditions countywide.

Dane County holds annual training sessions for new and returning harvester operators before the harvesting season begins. In that training, permanent and seasonal staff receive instruction on many topics including aquatic invasive species prevention protocols, plant identification, and communications. The Lakes Management Supervisor oversees the day-to-day operations of the staff, directed by the Lakes crew leader who is informed of lake conditions and plant harvesting needs by the Water Resources Planner. Particular concerns with a water body; deep versus shallow harvesting; collection of plant fragments from harvesters, plant self-fragmentation, and boat propellers etc. are all addressed in the supervision.

Working closely with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Dane County Land and Water Resources Department has developed harvesting priority maps that are included in many of the aquatic plant management plans and referred to in DNR harvesting permits issued to Dane County. Not every area that is identified for potential harvesting on the map will be harvested in any given harvesting season if there is little to no plant growth. Harvester operators are instructed not to cut and remove plants outside of harvesting priority areas identified on these maps, unless authorized by their supervisor in consultation with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Harvesting machines are designed to cut, collect and remove plant fragments. Machine operators do not cut and harvest aquatic plants in water less than three feet in depth except where it's permitted by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in the Yahara River.

Limits of the equipment, staff, and budget mean that plant harvesting for aesthetics, collection of wind-blown plant fragments due to boat propeller action, and the removal of plants that release from the sediment and float free in the fall cannot generally be accomplished. However, Dane County helps clean up plant materials at beaches and other public access points, even when the plant material is not associated with harvesting operations. Program managers also do their best to accommodate special requests for collection of naturally-occurring windblown and boat motor chopped plant fragments near private shorelines, as time and budget permit, and in consultation with Wisconsin DNR. Occasionally this collection of plant fragments occurs in waters less than three feet deep. The Dane County Lake Management Operations Manual provides instructions to harvesting machine operators about plant fragment collection.

There is a common misperception that excessive external nutrients carried into lakes in runoff from the watershed causes macrophyte (large aquatic plant) problems. In fact, external

nutrient loading usually produces algal blooms that shade and reduce macrophyte biomass. Attempts to control biomass by controlling nutrients in the water column are unproductive, according to G. Dennis Cooke and others in the third edition of *Restoration and Management of Lakes and Reservoirs* (2005). This is because rooted macrophytes, such as the nuisance Eurasian water-milfoil, usually get their phosphorus and nitrogen directly from sediments. In the short-term, reduced phosphorus in the water column resulting from watershed controls may actually result in more macrophyte growth, because clearer water permits more light penetration that fosters plant growth.

It could take many years to reduce the historical nutrient additions to lake sediments, especially in agricultural areas. Much important work is underway in the Yahara River watershed to reduce watershed phosphorus loadings. In the long-term, scientists and managers hope that community efforts can reduce sediment phosphorus, thereby more directly affecting plant growth.

Fisheries

Anglers sometimes raise concerns over harvesting vegetation in late spring and early summer during the fish spawning period. Harvesting aquatic vegetation during this critical time impacts a small fraction of the available spawning habitat for any given species and we continue to monitor the fish populations closely for any impacts aquatic plant harvesting may have. Dane County works closely with WDNR Fisheries and there appears to be no negative impact on the fishery as a whole. The Yahara Chain of Lakes continue to provide excellent fishing opportunities of all sorts including panfish, walleye, northern pike, largemouth bass, and musky.

Invasive Species

Much of the focus of Dane County's mechanical harvesting program is to cut and harvest Eurasian water-milfoil and other invasive and nuisance plants to help provide for reasonable use of the lakes for boating, fishing and swimming.

Dane County staff will continue to take steps to ensure that its plant harvesting equipment is cleaned and disinfected before moving it to other waterbodies, and follow all other Wisconsin invasive species laws (see Appendix B) to prevent transport of invasive plants to other waterbodies.

The invasive species below are more recent arrivals to the Yahara chain of lakes. Dane County staff, along with recreational users, following cleaning and disinfecting protocols will help prevent the spread of these and other invasive plants and animals.

Spiny Waterfleas

In 2009 populations of spiny waterfleas (SWF) were verified by the Wisconsin DNR to be present in the Yahara chain of lakes. Spiny waterfleas are zooplankton that are native to Europe and Asia. Introduction of SWF into the Great Lakes by ballast water discharged from ocean going ships most likely occurred in the 1980's, and since then the spread to inland waters has continued.

The most likely method of introduction of SWF into the Yahara chain of lakes was by a boat, bilge water, or live well that had not been decontaminated. Research suggests that the SWF were introduced into Lake Mendota in the mid 1990's based upon sediment core samples where spines are present. By 2009 SWF were found in Lake Mendota at densities that are higher than any other waterbody in its native or invaded range. (Walsh 2016)

The SWF are carnivorous predators eating native herbivorous zooplankton. This loss of native zooplankton can have negative impacts on the lake ecology, impacting the zooplankton structure and distribution. This loss of native zooplankton can also affect fish populations that rely on the zooplankton as a food source. Small fish try to prey upon SWF but their spines make them difficult to swallow. The loss of zooplankton can also increase the amount of phytoplankton, leading to greater turbidity, degraded plant health and reduced maximum depth where plants grow. As a result, we see greater algal blooms and more impacts on people using the water.

One of the impacts to anglers is that SWF clog fishing rod eyelets and accumulate on fishing lines.

Zebra Mussels

In 2011 in Lake Mendota a population of zebra mussels was verified by the Wisconsin DNR. Additionally in 2016 a population of zebra mussels was verified by the Wisconsin DNR in Lake Monona. Zebra mussels are native to Europe and Asia. The zebra mussel is a small bottom dwelling clam that spread through microscopic larvae called veligers. The zebra mussels were introduced into the Great Lakes in the 1980's most likely through the ballast water from ocean going ships, and since then zebra mussels have been spread to other inland waters.

The most likely method of introduction of zebra mussels into the Yahara chain of lakes was by a boat, bilge water, or live well that had not been decontaminated. The first observation of zebra mussels in the Yahara was in Lake Monona in 2001 when adults were found.

The zebra mussels are the only freshwater mollusk that can attach themselves to solid objects. They become prolific in many lakes and efficiently filter water, creating greater clarity, and altering the food web. There may be increased plant abundance, as well as bluegreen algae blooms. Zebra mussels affect shoreline residents, boat owners and swimmers when their shells accumulate on hard surfaces, making them a hazard to grab or stand on. Adult females can produce one million eggs per year.

Chinese Mystery Snails

In 2012 these invasive snails were found in Lake Waubesa. In 2015 they were found in Stewart Lake, and in 2017 they were found in Lake Monona. These snails are native to eastern Asia and have been transported to the area for aquarium trade and possibly by in mud on boats or trailers. With a hard operculum (trap door that seals the shell) these snails can survive out of water for four weeks (*Unstad, K.M. and others. Management of Biological Invasions (2013) Volume 4, Issue 2: 123–127*), making their transport to a new waterbody likely. The impacts of these snails are not very well-studied.

Recommended management for Lake Waubesa

Based on staff review of the plant survey data and public input, Dane County recommends the management elements found in this section, which are largely unchanged from 2018.

Lake Waubesa Goals

The goals for managing Lake Waubesa aquatic plants are to: (1) sustain favorable recreational access in areas where aquatic plant densities become a nuisance, (2) respond to and harvest localized areas with invasive plants including CLP and EWM, and (3) continue to protect littoral zone habitat and plant communities on undeveloped shorelines. Sustaining high value species [NR 107.08(4)] in the lake including clasping-leaf pondweed (*Potamogeton richardsonii*), horned pondweed (*Zannichelia palustris*), wild celery (*Vallisneria Americana*) and sago pondweed (*Struckenia pectinatus*). Other important native plants requiring protection include flat-stem pondweed (*P. zosteriformis*), spatterdock (*Nuphar variegata*), white water lily (*Nymphaea tuberosa*), muskgrass (*Chara*), slender naiad (*Najas flexilis*), leafy pondweed (*Potamogeton foliosus*), and water stargrass (*Heteranthera dubia*).

These overarching aquatic plant management goals are coupled with the more specific goals of Dane County's mechanical harvesting program: to cut and harvest Eurasian water-milfoil and other nuisance vegetation to help provide for reasonable use of the lakes for boating, fishing and swimming, while preserving the health and balance of the lake ecosystem.

Waubesa Recommendations

1. Conduct mechanical harvesting in areas where over abundant nuisance plants significantly impair recreational use, as determined by the Dane County APM staff.
2. Avoid designated or proposed Critical Habitat Areas under Wisconsin Administrative Codes. (Official designation of Critical Habitat Areas is a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources decision.)
3. The Dane County Water Resources Planner should document occurrences of high value native plants in regular scouting reports, including shoreline reference and GPS location. Dane County staff should make an annual summary report of these occurrences available to the public.

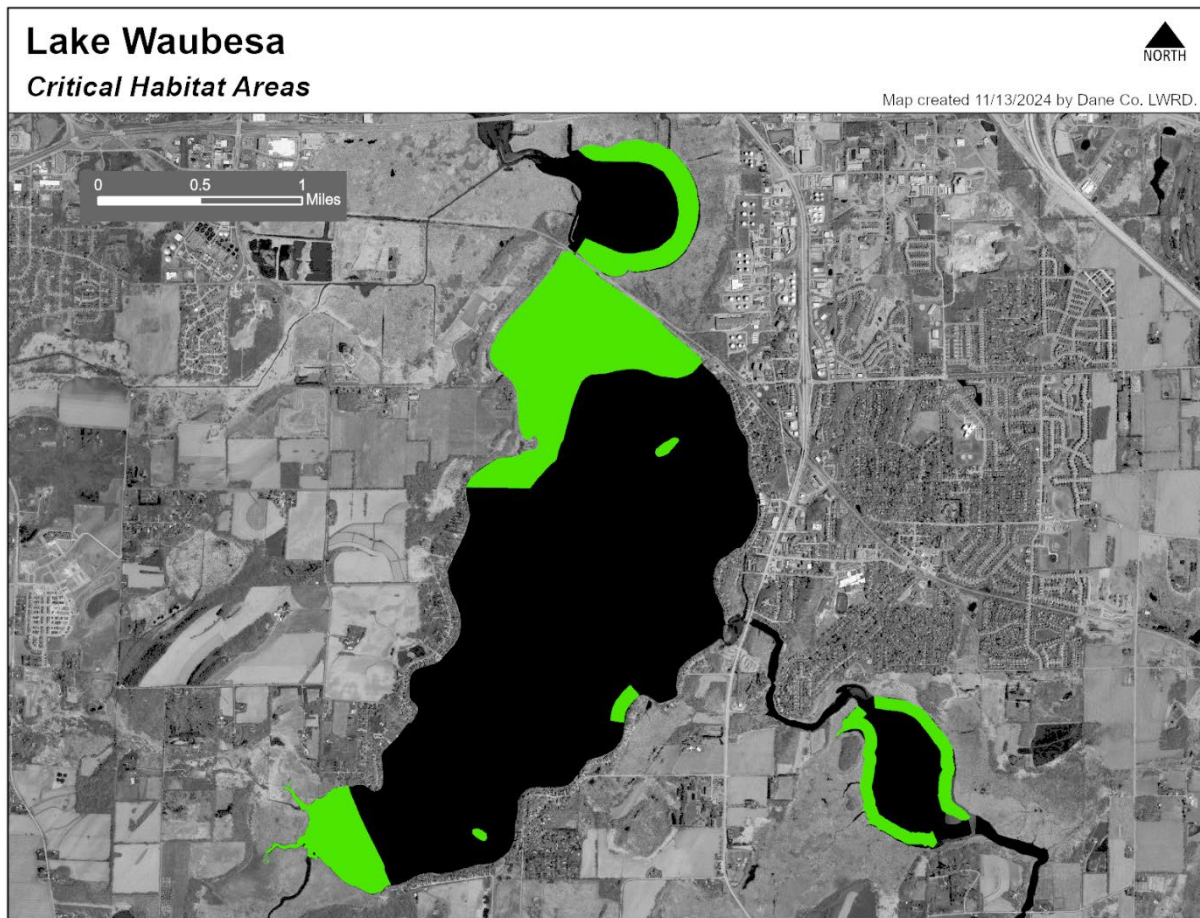
4. Dane County's mechanical harvesting crews should continue to take steps to prevent the spread of exotic invaders across Dane County lakes and streams. These steps include removing any visible plants, mud, debris, water, fish or animals from the machinery and thoroughly washing the equipment (see Appendix C).

Proposed Critical Habitat Areas

The Dane County Land and Water Resources Department recognizes valuable in-lake habitat on Lake Waubesa. While these areas have not gone through the formal Critical Habitat Designation under DNR, these areas will not be harvested in order to protect those habitats deemed valuable for fish and aquatic life. Wisconsin DNR's website describes the importance of the DNR's designation of Critical Habitat Areas as follows: "Every waterbody has critical habitat - those areas that are most important to the overall health of the aquatic plants and animals. Remarkably, eighty percent of the plants and animals on the state's endangered and threatened species list spend all or part of their life cycle within the near shore zone. Wisconsin law mandates special protections for these critical habitats. Critical Habitat Designation is a program that recognizes those areas and maps them so that everyone knows which areas are most vulnerable to impacts from human activity. A critical habitat designation assists waterfront owners by identifying these areas up front, so they can design their waterfront projects to protect habitat and ensure the long-term health of the lake they where they live."

The proposed Critical Habitat Areas in Figure 5 have been updated since the 2013 plan amendment, to add an area of undeveloped shoreline on the east shore of Lake Waubesa, west of Crescent Drive.

Figure 3. Proposed Lake Waubesa Critical Habitat Areas



Harvesting Priorities

Figure 4 is the updated mechanical harvesting priority map for Lake Waubesa, approved by Wisconsin DNR in April 2017. The approved change from the 2013 map extends the “priority 2” harvest area on the south shore, west to include several houses that should also receive harvesting services. Additional background on harvesting priorities is found in the Lake Management Operations Manual and posted on the LWRD website (<https://lwr.danecounty.gov/what-we-do/lake-management/aquatic-plant-management>). Annual training and daily supervision of harvester operators reinforce those plants should be harvested only from these planned areas, unless a variance from the plan has been approved by Wisconsin DNR. Actual effort is dictated based on plant conditions, as evaluated and reported by Dane County Staff.

Figure 4. Lake Waubesa harvesting priorities