

## **Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Program**

### **Protecting and Restoring Northern Wisconsin Shorelines**

#### **Situation**

Growing interest in natural shorelines is reflected in the success of a shoreline incentives program, the Burnett County Natural Shorelines Program. Like people throughout the state, Burnett County residents love their lakes and rivers, and most believe that keeping shorelines natural is one of the best ways to ensure their enjoyment for many generations. With 15,081 inland lakes, over 42,000 miles of rivers and streams and 5.3 million acres of wetlands, Wisconsin is rich in water resources. These vast resources play a fundamental role in our economy, our environment, our communities and our spiritual well-being.

With shoreline development at an all time high, natural shorelines are becoming a scarce resource in northern Wisconsin. In the last ten years, annual building permits in Burnett County have increased by seventy percent. A recent survey estimated that only about thirty percent of the county's shoreline parcels have an adequate natural buffer. There are many compelling reasons to reverse this trend. Shoreline preservation and restoration programs keep the water clean by filtering runoff and holding the soil in place. They provide a home for a diversity of creatures, create natural beauty and allow people to access and enjoy the water.

However, landowners have different points of view about the value of natural growth on shoreline properties. Some value a cleared area and consider trees and vegetation to block the view, rather than being part of the view. As one survey respondent put it, "People tend to want a view for themselves, but want to see a natural lakeshore everywhere else." Clearly, education must focus on the beauty of natural shorelines and the benefits and low maintenance of shoreland buffer strips.

#### **Response**

In 1998, prior to comprehensive planning legislation, Burnett County adopted a land use plan with comprehensive planning elements. The county also received a \$250,000 Lake Protection Grant from the Department of Natural Resources and began to implement the plan. UW-Extension educators have continued to offer a unique role in Wisconsin counties, helping to formulate a vision for communities and following up with specific programmatic responses to implement that vision. Burnett County UW-Extension educators facilitated public participation and assisted in policy development, as the land use plan requires management of land use conflict and development around the county's 500 lakes. Through a survey of shoreline property owners, UW-Extension identified interest in voluntary incentive-based preservation of lakes in addition to a regulatory approach, to get individuals and groups to enter a shoreland protection program.

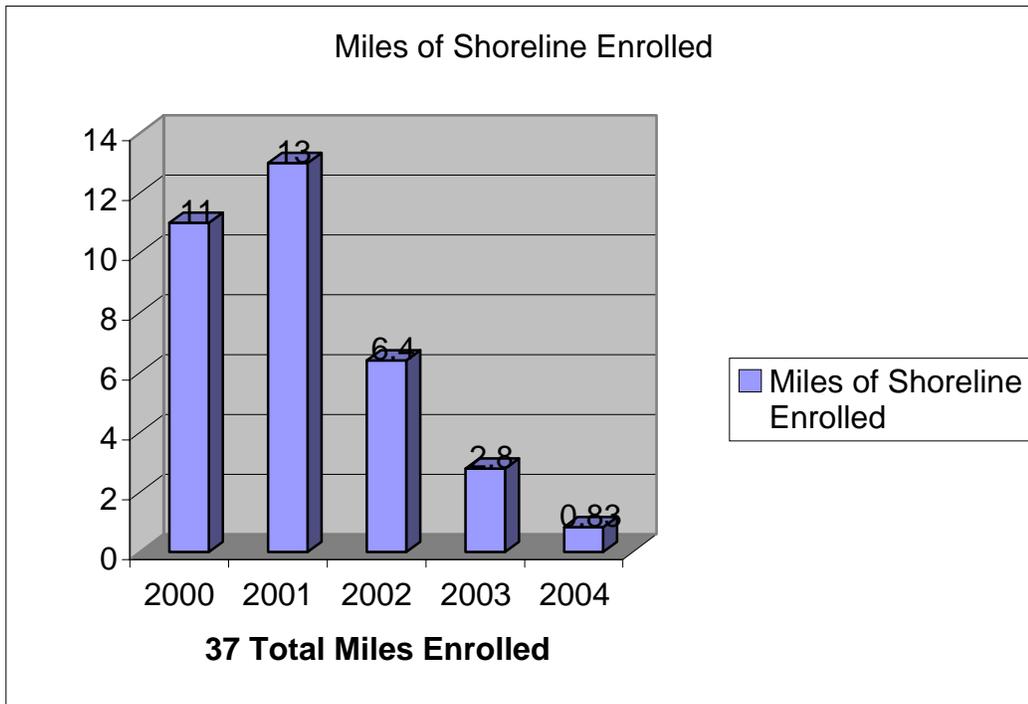
The Burnett County Land and Water Conservation Department administers landowner agreements for the Burnett County Natural Shorelines Program. The county requires that a natural zone of vegetation at least 35 feet wide be left intact next to the water. However, on many shoreline parcels, the protective zone of vegetation has been removed or greatly altered. Under the voluntary restoration program, property owners with lake easements are offered technical and financial assistance to restore their shoreline and reestablish the buffer zone.

If the vegetation along a property owner's shoreline hasn't been altered except for minimal clearing to allow access to the lake, they are urged to maintain it. If the shoreline has been cleared extensively, financial and technical assistance are available to reestablish native vegetation. While shoreline regulations preclude the removal of vegetation and in some instances require replanting the shoreline, the Burnett County Natural Shorelines Program asks for an additional voluntary commitment by owners through placing a covenant on their property stating that the shoreline will remain natural. This covenant allows a 30-foot wide viewing and access corridor to the lake or river.

Following an initial inspection that certifies the property meets program standards, participants in the Natural Shorelines Program receive a \$250 property tax credit the first year, with \$50 credit each year after. Owners are identified as a natural shoreline supporter with a small sign placed at the shoreline.

### **Outcomes**

The program is a partnership between UW-Extension, the Burnett County Land and Water Conservation Department and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). The Land and Water Conservation Department works with UW-Extension to develop conservation programs in the county, then administers the program and provides technical assistance. Since the Burnett County Natural Shorelines Program began in 2000, there have been preservation and restoration projects successfully completed on 507 properties. Over five years, a total of \$290,000 of grant funds was leveraged, primarily from WDNR to complete the restorations. To date, the amount of Burnett County shoreline protected can be measured by linear footage, which totals 195,956 feet, or about 37 miles of shoreline. The total square footage of shoreline restored to buffer zones is 91,334, or about 2 acres, which is a significant amount when viewed as a cumulative total of 35 to 75 feet of buffer per lot.



As it expands, the program is considering a long-term shift to increase the tax credits based on longer lengths of shoreline. Currently, 100 feet of shoreline receives the same amount of tax credits as 1,000 feet of shoreline. More promotion and marketing are also planned, as new owners purchase lake shore property. The turnover rate for shoreline ownership is approximately once every seven years.

The success of this shoreline incentives program is a model for protecting and restoring the increasingly scarce natural shorelines of northern Wisconsin. The Burnett County Natural Shorelines Program is demonstrating over time that everyone benefits from a healthy lake. It promotes the possibility that the demands of shoreland development and growing recreational use of lakes and rivers can be balanced with the desire for natural beauty and long-term benefits to aquatic and wildlife habitats and water quality.

## Contact

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