



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Joint Committee on Finance

Paper #611

Winnebago Lake System Staffing (Natural Resources -- Water Quality)

[LFB 2023-25 Budget Summary: Page 465, #8]

CURRENT LAW

Lake Winnebago is Wisconsin's largest inland lake, at 131,939 acres in size and stretching across Calumet, Fond du Lac, and Winnebago Counties. The lake supports large populations of fish, including sturgeon, walleye, white bass, northern pike, perch, and bluegill, all of which provide recreational fishing and sustenance to anglers and local communities. Additionally, the lake provides drinking water to more than 200,000 people in the state. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is responsible for part of oversight of the lake's fisheries, welfare, and ecosystem. DNR employs a variety of fisheries management, regulatory, and restoration-focused staff to maintain the health of the lake and to minimize overfishing, storm water runoff, and degradation of infrastructure.

DNR works in partnership with the Fox-Wolf Watershed Alliance nonprofit organization and several other parties to execute the 'Winnebago Waterways Lake Management Plan.' Since 2010, these groups have aimed to maintain safe and accessible aquatic recreation, protect fish communities, improve water quality, increase research efforts, and encourage public participation in all of these initiatives.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Assembly Bill 43/Senate Bill 70 would provide \$109,900 in 2023-24 and \$146,500 in 2024-25 with 2.0 positions to increase staffing for Lake Winnebago local lake protection and restoration efforts, including water quality and habitat improvement projects. Duties of the positions would include oversight of breakwall projects, water level management, and bird and waterfowl management.

2. Under the Winnebago Waterways Lake Management Plan, the counties of Fond du Lac, Calumet, and Winnebago, in partnership with DNR and several other parties, aim to restore the Lake Winnebago system due to poor water quality and degraded habitats. Under the plan's 2020 report, issues cited included harmful algal blooms, excessive nutrients and sediment, low water clarity, and degraded aquatic habitat. Additionally, the report notes that there are at least 10 invasive species residing in the lake, and shorelines are eroding. Phases 1, 2, 3, and 4 of the management plan are considered complete. Those phases included discussions with stakeholders, management options, and planning. Phase 5 involves implementation efforts that began in 2020 and are still underway.

3. Efforts under the plan have been funded through an intergovernmental cooperative agreement among the three counties and DNR, with support from DNR's surface water grants and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. In-kind support has been provided through volunteer hours.

4. AB 43/SB 70 would budget the positions under DNR's waterways and wetlands program in the Division of External Services, funded from the environmental management account of the segregated (SEG) environmental fund. Since the bill's introduction, the Administration and DNR indicate that it would be more consistent with the positions' duties and funding sources to budget 1.0 position for lake management in the water quality program in the Division of Environmental Management, and the 1.0 position for habitat management efforts in the fisheries program in the Division of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. The Department reports that the work intended for the 2.0 requested positions cannot be absorbed by existing staff.

5. The position supporting lake management in the water quality program would assist with: (a) measuring concentrations of nutrients and minerals to ensure safe levels; (b) conducting biotic and physical assessments of the lake; and (c) consulting on breakwall construction. This 1.0 position would be funded at \$54,900 in 2023-24 and \$73,300 in 2024-25 by environmental management SEG. The environmental management account is expected to have an available balance of \$33.2 million on June 30, 2023, and could reasonably handle the ongoing expense of the 1.0 waterways position.

6. The position supporting habitat management would work to: (a) increase and protect habitat abundance, quality, and diversity; (b) increase wetland and grassland acreage; and (c) promote collaboration and facilitated management for habitat restoration and protection. This 1.0 position would be funded at \$55,000 in 2023-24 and \$73,200 in 2024-25 in the Division of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks.

7. Typically, fisheries management positions would be supported by the fish and wildlife account of the segregated conservation fund. The Committee could authorize 1.0 SEG position under the fish and wildlife general operations appropriation [Alternative 2a].

8. The fish and wildlife account is anticipated to have insufficient available balances and ongoing revenues in the 2023-25 biennium under current law to support all budgeted expenditures. (See the separate issue paper under "Natural Resources -- Fish, Wildlife, and Natural Heritage Conservation.") The Committee could consider an alternative source of a GPR general operations appropriation for fisheries management, which has base funding of \$1,315,100 each year of the 2023-25 biennium [Alternative 2b]. Funding in this appropriation is mostly associated with the Wisconsin

Walleye Initiative begun under 2013 Wisconsin Act 20. As the Lake Winnebago system has a well-known walleye fishery, such a funding source could be viewed as appropriate for the position. The Committee could consider authorizing the position only in the 2023-25 biennium, and DNR would be authorized to fund the positions with existing funding. The position would then receive full funding under standard budget adjustments in the 2025-27 biennial budget bill.

9. In addition to any of the alternatives above, the Committee could specify that the positions are two-year [Alternative 3a] or four-year [Alternative 3b] project positions. Project positions may be appropriate to allow program implementation to proceed in the coming two to four years, and an assessment of future need could be made upon the positions' expiration. The Committee could also take no action [Alternative 4].

ALTERNATIVES

1. Provide 1.0 lake management position with \$54,900 environmental management SEG in 2023-24 and \$73,300 in 2024-25 to increase staffing for Lake Winnebago local lake protection and restoration efforts.

ALT 1	Change to Base	
	Funding	Positions
SEG	\$128,200	1.00

2. Provide 1.0 fisheries management position to increase staffing for Lake Winnebago local lake protection and restoration efforts from one of the following:

a. Fish and wildlife SEG, with \$55,000 SEG in 2023-24 and \$73,200 in 2024-25.

ALT 2a	Change to Base	
	Funding	Positions
SEG	\$128,200	1.00

b. General purpose revenues.

ALT 2b	Change to Base	
	Positions	
GPR	1.00	

3. In addition to any of the alternatives above, specify that the positions are project positions with terms of:

- a. Two years; or
 - b. Four years.
4. Take no action.

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