

St. Marys AOC Habitat Restoration

Improving the Health of the St. Marys River

The Little Rapids Habitat Restoration Project will restore healthy water flow to 50-70 acres of aquatic habitat and re-establish a portion of the historic rapids in the St. Marys River



Project location along the Sugar Island causeway

Project Highlights

- Replace two failing culverts under the existing causeway with a bridge approximately 600 feet long to increase water flow
- Provide safe pedestrian access for fishing along the bridge
- Create critical habitat for valuable sport fish and other aquatic resources
- Complete required restoration on the U.S. side of the St. Marys River as a crucial step toward its eventual removal from the list of Great Lakes AOCs or “toxic hotspots”
- Funding is provided by the GLRI and U.S. EPA through NOAA and the Great Lakes Commission
- The Chippewa County Road Commission and the EUP Regional Planning & Development Commission are implementing this project
- Lake Superior State University is monitoring the impact of restoration on the aquatic ecosystem

Environmental Benefits

Complete U.S. AOC restoration work
Fish spawning and invertebrate habitat

Economic Benefits

Revitalized sport fishing
Tourism
Recreation

Community Benefits

Fishing access
Safer roadway
Pedestrian walkway

Background of the AOC

The St. Marys River is a globally unique river that forms the binational connecting channel between Lake Superior and Lake Huron, two of the largest freshwater systems in the world, with shared jurisdiction between the Canadian Province of Ontario and the State of Michigan. Both communities have a strong tourism-based economy that is centered on sport fishing and other recreational activities on the St. Marys River. Despite its popularity for recreation, the St. Marys River is designated as one of Michigan's 14 Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOCs) due to pollution and habitat alteration. The river is listed for 10 of the 14 Beneficial Use Impairments (BUIs) evaluated under the AOC program, including Fish and Wildlife Populations and Habitat. The Little Rapids Restoration Project will address the habitat related BUIs and is the last anticipated project necessary to remove the St. Marys River from the list of AOCs.



Impounded water along the Sugar Island causeway

History of the River

Rapids habitat on the St. Marys River has historically been impacted by various forms of development, including dredging, filling, diversion, and urban development. Construction of the causeway across the Little Rapids degraded the rapids and damaged the health of the native fish community. However, with proper engineering and design, the site can be restored to provide foraging, spawning, and nursery habitat for a wide variety of sport fish as well as other aquatic organisms needed for a healthy river system. Restoring the Little Rapids area has been identified as a priority for addressing fish and wildlife impairments in the St. Marys River and is the final restoration action needed on the U.S. side of the river. This project is the culmination of nearly three decades of work by state and local partners to address a legacy of pollution in the St. Marys River, including removing contaminated sediments, stopping combined sewer overflows, reducing nonpoint source pollution, and controlling harmful invasive species like sea lamprey. Completing the project will contribute to the eventual delisting of the St. Marys River as an AOC.

“The Road Commission is grateful for the opportunity to improve this roadway, create safer conditions for pedestrians and drivers, and support our community’s long-standing efforts to restore the health of the St. Marys River.”

Richard Timmer

Chippewa County Road Commission Board Chairman

Project Progress

Planning for this project was initiated over two decades ago with input from local stakeholders guiding restoration efforts. Key stakeholders include the St. Marys River Binational Public Advisory Council, Soo Area Sportsmen’s Club, Michigan DNR, Michigan DEQ, Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority, and Chippewa County Road Commission. In 2011, the EUP Regional Planning & Development Commission received GLRI funding for preliminary hydraulic modeling, engineering studies and an environmental assessment. Additional site investigations were conducted in 2014 and 2015. Major bridge construction was completed in 2016 and follow up work and ecological monitoring will occur in 2017.

Funding and Partners

Approximately \$9.4 million is available for this project through the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), a regional program that is supporting implementation of a comprehensive restoration plan for the Great Lakes, including cleaning up the Areas of Concern. The project funding comes from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) through a partnership with the Great Lakes Commission. The project is being managed locally by the Chippewa County Road Commission, which owns and is responsible for maintaining the causeway. Lake Superior State University is providing monitoring of the river before, during and after project construction.

For More Information Contact:

Rob Laitinen, Superintendent/Manager,
Chippewa County Road Commission, 906-635-5295, surveyor@sault.com

Heather Braun, Project Manager for Habitat Restoration,
Great Lakes Commission, 734-971-9135, hbraun@glc.org

Jeff Hagan, Executive Director,
EUP Regional Planning & Development Commission, 906-635-1581,
Toll Free: 855-885-3690, jshagan@eup-planning.org

