

Muskegon Lake AOC Habitat Restoration

The Mill Debris removal project will improve lake bottom and wetland habitat benefitting lake sturgeon and other aquatic life by removing historic logging-era wood from nearshore and coastal sections of Muskegon Lake.

Project Highlights

- Remove 105,922 metric tons of mill debris and restore 10.5 acres of open water and emergent wetland habitat
- Improve lake bottom (benthic) habitat, especially areas that can be utilized by lake sturgeon (*Acipenser fulvescens*)
- Complete restoration of Muskegon Lake to remove it from the list of Great Lakes Areas of Concern (AOCs) or “toxic hotspots” as early as 2019
- Funding is provided by the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Great Lakes Commission (GLC) Regional Partnership
- The West Michigan Shoreline Regional Development Commission (WMSRDC) is implementing this project
- The Grand Valley State University Annis Water Resources Institute (GVSU AWRI) is developing monitoring protocols to determine the impact of sawmill debris on the aquatic ecosystem



Environmental Benefits

Reconnected river/wetlands
Restored fish and wildlife habitat

Economic Benefits

Recreation
Re-use and repurposing of dredged material
Enhanced local fishery

Community Benefits

Repurposing of some of the removed wood debris
Public park improvement

Background of the Area of Concern (AOC)

Within the lower Muskegon River watershed lies the Muskegon Lake AOC, a drowned river mouth lake that flows into Lake Michigan, at a shoreline that is part of the world's largest assemblage of freshwater sand dunes. Muskegon Lake was designated an AOC in 1985 due to ecological problems caused by industrial discharges, shoreline alterations, and the filling of open water and coastal wetlands. Since 1992, community groups, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations have worked collaboratively to remediate contaminated sediments and to restore and protect fish and wildlife species and their habitats. Historic sawmill debris, foundry sand, and slag filled 798 acres of open water and emergent wetlands in the AOC. Nearly 25% of Muskegon Lake's open water and shallow wetlands were filled. Approximately 74 percent of the shoreline was hardened with wood pilings, sheet metal, foundry slag and concrete. This resulted in the loss and degradation of shallow water ecosystems, isolation and fragmentation of coastal wetlands, and the associated degradation of water quality and fish and wildlife populations. With completion of this and several other projects, the U.S. EPA expects to remove Muskegon Lake from the list of Great Lakes AOCs as early as 2019.

Logging Industry Legacy

Historical deposits of sawmill debris and other types of marine debris are impacting the ecological quality of Muskegon Lake. The presence of mill debris is not natural, but is a remnant of the logging industry that dominated the Muskegon Lake shoreline in the late 1800s. During that time, byproducts from 47 sawmill operations (sawdust and slabwood) were routinely dumped into the lake along the south and north shorelines. As a result of these and other industrial impacts, Muskegon Lake became heavily degraded with significant impairments to the native ecological community that persisted for decades.

Project Progress

This project builds upon the work funded by a NOAA GLRI grant received by WMSRDC in 2010 to investigate the restoration potential at locations impacted by mill debris. Final engineering and design at the chosen locations were based on conditions at each site as well as the overall impact to Muskegon Lake. Social, economic and environmental benefits were considered in deciding the appropriate quantities of wood for removal. Potential re-use opportunities of wood, restoration activities, and the methods to be used to permanently protect the restored resources were also examined. GVSU AWRI is implementing a pre-post removal monitoring protocol to help further examine the impact of mill debris on the plant and wildlife on the lake bottom and effects of restoration activities.

“Repurposing this historic logging-era sawmill waste has been celebrated by the local community. The wood has been used for brew pub tables, artwork and brownfield redevelopment fill. This habitat restoration project has been a real win/win for the local economy and the environment.”

*- Mayor Steve Gawron,
City of Muskegon*

Funding and Partners

Approximately \$4.1 million is available for this project through the GLRI, a regional program that is supporting implementation of a comprehensive restoration plan for the Great Lakes, including cleaning up the AOCs. The project funding comes from NOAA through a Regional Partnership with the GLC. The project is being managed locally by WMSRDC and ecological monitoring is being performed by the GVSU AWRI.

For More Information Contact

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