

# White Bear Lake Conservation District takes first glimpse into lake use study

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The White Bear Conservation District (WBLCD) board took its first glance at a draft of the 2024 lake use study. The board will now provide feedback and receive the final report. Eventually, a community presentation will be scheduled to go over the study's findings.

"I think it is somewhat groundbreaking, considering there hasn't been a lake use study done in the metro area in at least 10 years," said Steve McComas of Blue Water Science, who was hired to do the study.

The study was approved in March 2024 and the lake use study group began work on the homeowners' and lake users' surveys. McComas conducted the first boat count survey in late May 2024.

The study dives into water quality, lake levels, boat inventory and lake boating density, and includes survey data from boaters and lake users.

McComas noted that the lake hasn't changed much over the last 150 years when it comes to its shape.

When it comes to water quality, the clarity has generally been increasing over the last 70 years, but has dipped a bit in the last few years, likely due to zebra mussels. "The clarity is still good, but not as good as it was," McComas noted.

On a positive note, both phosphorus and chlorophyll levels have decreased. "That's what we like to see," he said.

Chloride levels in the lake, on the other hand, have increased, primarily due to road salt. "That's pretty typical for most lakes in the metro area and a lot of lakes in Minnesota," McComas explained.

When it comes to lake level, there have been both ups and downs. "The fluctuation has been somewhat cyclical," McComas said, noting that precipitation and temperatures have played a big factor in lake levels.

Herbicides have been used in the lake dating back to the '50s. Generally, when lake levels have gone up, treatment has decreased. McComas drew attention to 1988, when Eurasian watermilfoil was discovered in the lake.

The lake has seen a huge increase in personal watercraft like kayaks and paddleboards. The lake has also seen an increase in pontoons. The number of rear tiller boats and sailboats has decreased. From 1999 to 2024, there has been an increase of 31% in the number of boats on the lake.

"Kayaks have really hit their stride," McComas said, noting the one thing that surprised him in the study was the dramatic increase in kayaks and paddleboards. "The trend on a lot of lakes has been that you get more passive use ... aesthetics are important," he explained. "On White Bear Lake, there has been a big increase in recreational use."

As a part of the study, Blue Water Science received over 100 responses from lake residents. The surveys revealed that the primary activity that lake users enjoy is pleasure boating, cruising around the lake on a pontoon and kayaking.

The perception of the lake is that it can be crowded. In 2025, 74% of survey respondents said they felt it was crowded, compared to 81% of respondents in 2024. McComas said the main problems are caused by Jet Skis and wake boats.

McComas thanked Vice Chair Meredith Walburg and Director Mark Wisniewski for all their work in reviewing the draft before it was presented to the board. "Without (their) help, the report would have been a lot worse. They did a heck of a job to make a lot of this stuff more understandable."

Once the study report is finalized, the WBLCD will invite the public to a full presentation at a future board meeting.

## Summary of survey findings

- Water quality is improving based on clarity, phosphorus and algae data.
- From the shoreline inventory, the number of fishing boats (rear tiller) and sailboats has decreased in the last 25 years.
- The number of personal watercraft and pontoons has increased.
- Biggest change in boat use is a dramatic increase in the number of kayaks and paddleboards.
- Powered boats/dock ratio is 2.0. With all boats it is 3.1 crafts/dock.

- Boat launches and boat density on the lake have decreased in the last 25 years. Boat density in 2024 is crowded (less than 20 acres/boat using MnDNR criteria) in the afternoon on peak days. Lake users find the lake crowded at times in 2005 (74%) and 2024 (81%).
- Over the last 25 years, public access parking spaces have remained constant, and shoreline powered craft numbers have been relatively constant. Lake boat density on White Bear Lake has not increased. Engine horsepower seems to have increased.