

Lac du Flambeau Tribe's Efforts to Protect Reservation Waters Benefits Us All
By Melissa K. Scanlan and Andrew Hanson, Midwest Environmental Advocates
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Last October, the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians took a small but important step toward responsibly managing their water-rich reservation in northern Wisconsin. The Band requested that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant it the authority to develop standards for the lakes, rivers, and wetlands on the reservation.

It makes sense that water is so integral to the economic livelihood, culture and spirit of the Lac du Flambeau Band. With 260 lakes, 71 miles of streams and rivers, and 24,000 acres of wetlands, about half of the surface area of the reservation is water.

Traditional fishing activities, as well as subsistence hunting and wild-rice gathering, are vitally dependent on the quality of their water. In fact, the name Lac du Flambeau – meaning “Lake of the Torches” - reflects the water-rich culture of the people.

Given the importance of water to its survival, it is no surprise that the Band is working to develop standards to protect Reservation waters. What may be a surprise, however, is that currently these Reservation waters fall into a regulatory void. Outside the Reservation, the State of Wisconsin has been approved by the U.S. EPA to set standards to protect state waters. Inside the Reservation, the Lac du Flambeau are seeking a similar approval from the U.S. EPA.

The interconnected waters of the Lac du Flambeau Reservation are shared by everyone, including the non-tribal members who comprise 40% of the population there. The problem is that absent the U.S. EPA approval, the Band only has authority over the activities of its members, not the non-native businesses and residents living within the reservation. The practical result on the Reservation is that there are effectively no standards in place to protect these valuable interconnected waters.

If the U.S. EPA approves the Band's ability to protect its waters, the Band will then be able to develop standards to protect Reservation waters – *not* waters off of the reservation. And due to the flowing nature of water, improvements to Reservation waters will only send cleaner water to the downstream users off the Reservation. In a clean water-dependent economy like that of Northern Wisconsin, this can only be seen as a gift to the Band's neighbors.

The bottom line is that what the Lac du Flambeau Band is seeking is eminently reasonable, fair and protective of the vulnerable waters we all share. We should send letters of support to Todd Ambs at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources before the close of the public comment period on February 20, 2006.

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