A Canadian Phosphorus Management Plan for Lake of the Woods

Remarks given by Teika Newton, Executive Director LOWWSF, at the Canada Water Agency's February 24, 2025 Ministerial announcement of the Lake of the Woods Freshwater Ecosystem Initiative in Winnipeg, MB.

Good morning and thank you for welcoming me today. My name is Teika Newton and I am the Executive Director of the Lake of the Woods Water Sustainability Foundation.

As a resident of neighbouring Treaty 3 territory, it gives me great pleasure to join you here on Treaty 1 territory today. Through support from the Canada Water Agency, we are excited to announce a new project, *Developing a Domestic Phosphorus Management Plan for Lake of the Woods.*

20 years ago, our Foundation began convening citizens, municipalities, Indigenous nations and state, provincial and federal governments in Ontario, Manitoba and Minnesota to amass the scientific, technical and community knowledge needed to inform an international water quality plan, while building the trust and capacity to implement it. With the support of people in our watershed, we called for an International Joint Commission (IJC) mandate for Lake of the Woods, and in a testament to our efforts, in 2013, governments directed the IJC to establish the International Rainy-Lake of the Woods Watershed Board (IRLWWB).

With so many agencies and partners active in the basin, the Lake of the Woods Water Sustainability Foundation plays a crucial role in supporting and often coordinating interagency collaboration.

Last year, I engaged dozens of international agencies and partners to develop recommendations to guide international water quality objectives for phosphorus, which also became the basis for water quality alerts through the International Joint Commission board.

After two decades of exhaustive work to build the scientific and policy-making base to support long-term water quality sustainability for Lake of the Woods, we are finally at an important inflection point in 2025.

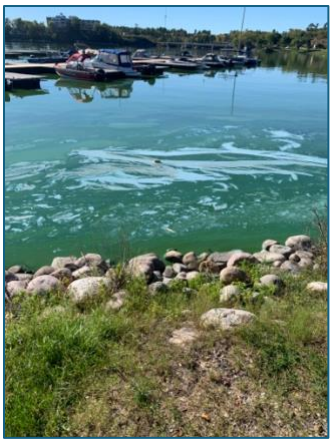
Since the Foundation's inception – and indeed, long before that - algae blooms have been a consistent water quality concern facing Lake of the Woods. In our watershed, phosphorus is the primary nutrient driving these blooms. In recent decades, blooms have become more frequent, toxic and now last later in the year, often well into the fall.

Kenora Harbourfront algae bloom, September 25, 2024. Photo by Mike Newton.

Today, we are moving forward a key action to address the algae problem from the Canadian side of the watershed.

Over the next couple of years, the Lake of the Woods Water Sustainability Foundation will be working with local communities, knowledge keepers, stakeholders and experts in the Canadian portions of Rainy River and the Lake of the Woods to develop a

domestic phosphorus management plan that will, like the plan already underway in Minnesota, support international water quality goals.



Kenora Harbourfront algae bloom, September 25, 2024. Photo by Joelle Thomson.

We are fortunate to be able to access the expertise and technical capacity of Indigenous nations in our watershed. Additionally, our work will build on the legacy of other outstanding scientific and technical inquiry and policymaking in the Rainy-Lake of the Woods watershed, including the Government of Canada's international science and modelling studies of the lake that began in 2016, Minnesota's Total Maximum Daily Load study on excess nutrients for Lake of the Woods which ran from 2004-2015 and the state's associated restoration plan (published in 2021), and an international network of Indigenous, provincial, state, county, and federal water quality monitoring efforts.

Over the next couple of years, with the support of the Canada Water Agency's Freshwater Ecosystem Initiative for Lake of the Woods, our team will be focused on developing Canada's domestic phosphorus management plan for Rainy-Lake of the Woods.

For this project, our task involves establishing a network of interested parties to support this planning work. Together we will develop a framework to monitor and review progress toward achieving desired phosphorus-reduction outcomes for Lake of the Woods. We anticipate this framework will support the IJC Board's alert levels for nutrients and algae, as well as any related future international water quality objectives.

In January, we launched the project steering committee – a group of about 10 sectoral leaders, academics, and community experts and knowledge keepers who will provide high level oversight and guidance as the project progresses. We are currently establishing two project working groups, as well as an Indigenous engagement committee. We hope there will be lots of interaction and communication between the steering committee and the Indigenous EC so that our work is well-informed by both traditional Indigenous resource management, ecological, and sociological knowledge, as well as practical experiences from non-Indigenous land managers and practitioners across many sectors.

Of the two project working groups, one will examine point sources – permitted wastewater facilities – and their task will be to assess whether and where it might be possible to reduce loads even further under those permits. The other group will look at non-point sources – the nutrients that flow from the landscape and may be related to agriculture, forestry, mining, development, and other land-use changes, as well as natural sources including erosion, sediment transfer and airborne sources. That group will help to identify areas that can be targeted for phosphorus abatement, as well as strategies to do so.

Our work will continue through March 2027 to build a robust network of people and groups eager to tackle the algae problem together by helping to build, and eventually execute, the domestic phosphorus management plan for Rainy-Lake of the Woods.