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News and Commentary

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Great Pond Task Force

Nick Houtman

As state legislators test the waters of political cooperation in 1995, they will get their feet wet over another issue: management of Maine's great ponds. A source of pride, recreation, tourist dollars and drinking water, these 2,787 waterbodies face threats to their water quality, fisheries and traditional public access. In 1992, the legislature gave the State Planning Office (SPO) the task of addressing these and other issues through a newly created Great Ponds Task Force.

"Lakes are one of Maine's greatest economic assets," says the SPO's Hank Tyler, task force coordinator. "Our challenge is to find the balance between environmental protection and sustaining that economic base."

Moreover, current management is fragmented, Tyler notes. Since seven state agencies have authority over some aspect of great ponds and additional private and non-profit organizations have related interests, the State Planning Office expects to play a crucial coordinating role in exploring policy options.

The legislature directed the task force to develop a management strategy and guidelines for state policies on public access sites, great pond classification, conflict reduction and evaluation of the phosphorus allocation method used to make local land use decisions. In December, Tyler submitted an interim report outlining major issues and recommending re-authorization of the Great Ponds Task Force.

By definition, great ponds must be larger than 10 acres in their natural (undammed) state or 30 acres if water levels are artificially controlled. The Colonial Ordinance of 1641-47 guarantees public access for fishing, fowling and navigation.

The interim report to the Energy and Natural Resources Committee notes that a 1988 University of Maine study estimated the value of great pond fisheries alone at \$160 million annually. Additional work began this summer to determine the relationship between water quality and property values, but no estimates have been made on the values associated with great pond tourism or with year round home construction near great pond shores. Nevertheless, inland tourism and summer jobs have long been tied to the state's scenic lakes.

In creating the task force, the Legislature called for management to be carried out on the basis of watershed boundaries. Chapter 20, Protection of Maine Lakes, S1841, states: "A primary goal of the protection of the State's great ponds is to ensure that consistent land use management

practices and regulations are applied throughout the watershed of each great pond." Although most direct sources of domestic sewage in great ponds have been eliminated, nonpoint sources such as runoff from roads, fields and construction sites still funnel nutrients and sediment into lakes statewide.

Calls for integrated watershed management have been made repeatedly in recent years, but users of great ponds still face a myriad of sometimes conflicting policies among the seven state agencies with lake-related responsibilities. For example, Inland Fisheries and Wildlife promotes public access and recreational use while Human Services limits contact with drinking water sources. At the local level, land use rules vary according to town boundaries, not watershed protection needs.

Great ponds are recognized for outstanding salmon, bass and brook trout fisheries, but these resources have also declined under increasing angler pressure, the draft notes. The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife is proposing new rules on some ponds to protect high quality fisheries.

The interim report suggests broad strategies to guide state policies into the next century. These include:

- educational efforts to inform citizens and decision-makers about the hydrology, ecology and chemistry of great ponds and methods for protecting them
- an enhanced water quality monitoring program
- a method to resolve conflicts over surface water uses
- development of a statewide land use classification system for lands around great ponds
- increased public access and ownership of great pond shorelines
- enhanced staffing of the Shoreland Zoning program and continuing code enforcement officer training efforts
- continued state support for removal of substandard sewage systems
- concern for exotic species such as purple loosestrife and zebra mussels.

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