

Research Estuary Tour

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INTRO: This is Superior Science News. Today's program explores efforts underway to establish a national freshwater research estuary on the St. Louis River.

NAT SOUND: **"One of you sit up here and one of you sit on the deck back there."**

Light rain and cool air blowing off Lake Superior couldn't keep representatives from the Wisconsin DNR's Coastal Management Program and several other agencies from heading out on the water. The group of fifteen set out in four boats to get a closer look at the site nominated for the second freshwater research estuary on the Great Lakes: the St. Louis River, one of the major rivers feeding into Lake Superior.

NAT SOUND: Boat starting and engine humming.

DNR Secretary Matt Frank was along for the ride. He says there is much to learn from the Great Lakes, especially Lake Superior.

"The Great Lakes represent ninety percent of the world's freshwater resource; it's right here in our backyard. So, it's really important that we understand the linkage between our tributaries into the Great Lakes, our watersheds, our wetlands – how these things are linked together. It'll be a very rich opportunity for our researchers to learn more about it so we can do a better job protecting it."

The St. Louis River National Estuarine Research Reserve will join 26 other reserves in the U.S. Most of those look at the mixing of salt and fresh water that occurs in the lower parts of rivers as they enter the ocean. In the Great Lakes, an estuary is considered an area where a river or stream enters one of the lakes. It's an area of mixing and many of the issues associated with saltwater estuaries – such as pollution and productivity – are similar.

The St. Louis River reserve will provide four major functions: K through 12 and community education, stewardship, and research.

"In terms of the education, we can expect a whole range of things."

That's UW-Extension Northern District Director John Preissing (Pricing).

“They will be using informative stations. There will be research, which will include both the DNR, UW-Superior, UW-System people, UW-Extension, and those will be shared in many different places as well.”

NAT SOUND: Geese honking ...

“We’re in the channel that runs behind Clough Island here. So we’re on the back side of Clough Island.”

The estuary reserve will cover nearly 11,000 acres along the St. Louis River. DNR Regional Water Leader Tom Jerow says the amount of public land available and the quality of habitat makes this site worthy of a research center on the Great Lakes.

“ . . . And the different habitats – you really kind of get a feel of it as you go up the estuary here as it changes. That’s what an estuary is – it’s the transition between the river and the lake.”

The lower part of the river is home to many plants, animals, birds, and nearly 70 species of non-native and native fish. Jerow says the center will shine light on challenges facing the different habitats and the lake.

“ . . . Tremendous opportunities to work on invasive species and water quality, sediment remediation – because we have lots of contaminated sediments to deal with – and all of those details we’ll be working with our partner agencies over the next year or so to develop a management plan.”

DNR Regional Director John Gozdziński (Guzz-jow-ski) says a federal environmental impact statement will be conducted while a management plan for the project is developed.

“That’s going to take time and a lot of work, but it’s an important thing where we’ll develop some suggestions and we’ll take that out to the public because this is really the public’s project as well. We need their support and ownership to make it successful.”

Gozdziński says they hope to get people familiar with the estuary with on-the-water experiences.

“We would eventually hope to do something like that. Again, those are different facets of the plan that will be fleshed out in the coming months. That’s when we’ll depend on our colleagues at UW-Extension. They’re the experts when it comes to education and outreach.”

Minnesota Sea Grant is interested in helping coordinate research between Wisconsin and Minnesota scientists. This will allow for a better understanding of the processes occurring in the estuary, trends in conditions, and tracking the effects of restoration efforts.

DNR officials say it could be a year to 18 months before the site receives formal designation.

For Superior Science News, I'm Marie Zhuikov.

OUTRO: This is a production of the Minnesota Sea Grant program at UMD and KUWS radio.

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