

Horsehead Lake Spring 2026 Newsletter

Brought to you by the Horsehead Lake Protection & Rehabilitation District #1



Sunset over Horsehead Lake — photo by Kris and Tom Niebler.

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Message from the Chair

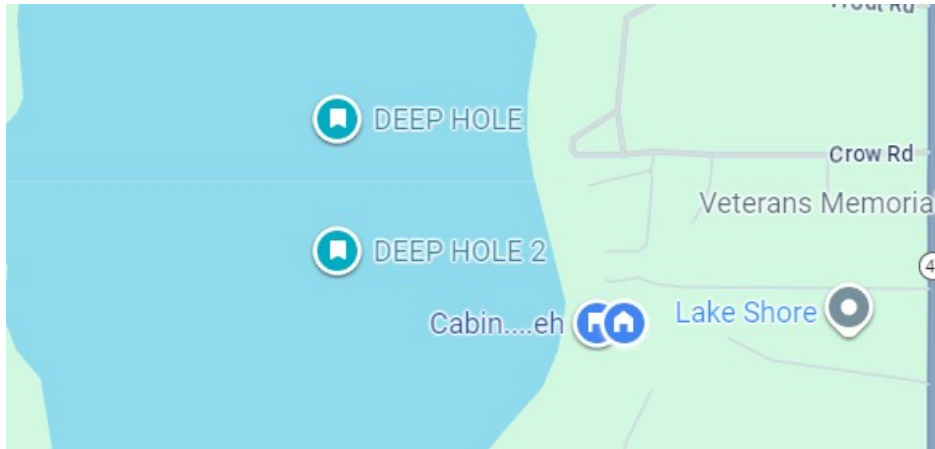
“There is no season quite like spring on Horsehead Lake. The ice has let go, the loons are back on the water, and the shoreline is waking up again. After a long winter watching the aerators and the ice, it is a relief to feel the lake come back to life. This issue is all about the season ahead — what we learned over the winter, the work planned for the coming months, our budget for the year, and the many ways you can stay connected and pitch in. Thank you, as always, for being part of this community and for helping us protect a place we all love.”

– *Dusten Tornow, Chairperson*

Winter Dissolved Oxygen Monitoring & Aeration

As many of you know, Horsehead Lake is shallow and has a long-standing winter dissolved oxygen (DO) issue. Once ice covers the lake, the exchange of oxygen between air and water stops. Our fish depend on that oxygen, and when levels fall from roughly 10 PPM in summer to less than 2 PPM under the ice, fish become stressed and a winter fish kill can occur. To counter this, we run aerators that bubble air up through the water column, dissolving oxygen back into the lake.

This past winter was our **second year** of remote sensor testing, with sensors placed at **two** locations — **DEEP HOLE** and **DEEP HOLE 2** — marked by buoys. Thank you to everyone who left the buoys and equipment undisturbed through the season. Now that the ice is off, the sensors have been retrieved and the data reviewed.



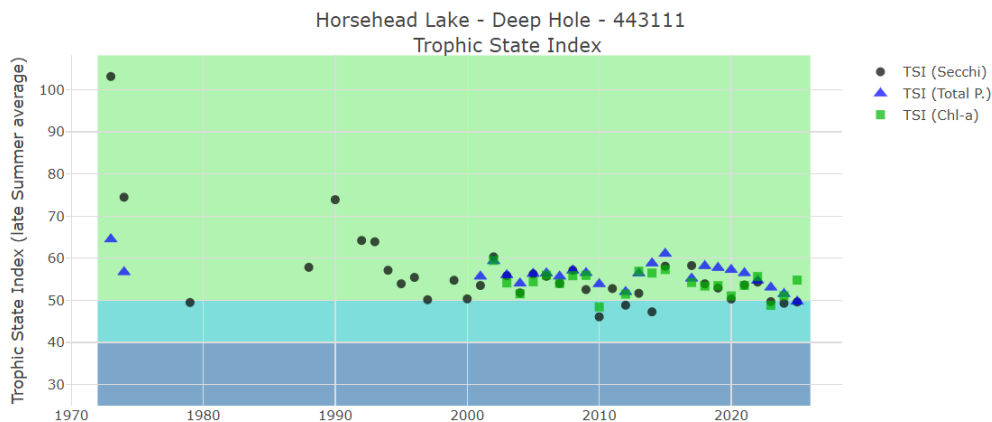
Remote DO sensor locations: DEEP HOLE and DEEP HOLE 2.

A big thank-you to **Dave Averbeck** for monitoring the aerators all winter, and to **Paul Bursik** and **Kevin Collins** for the manual DO testing. Manual sampling is never easy — it depends on weather, ice depth, and willing volunteers to drill and sample. **We are always looking for help here, ideally someone who lives on the lake with snowmobile access. Call Kevin Collins if you can lend a hand.**

Water Quality — The Long View

While a heavy weed year can make the lake look less inviting, the underlying water chemistry continues to show slow, steady improvement in clarity, phosphorus, and chlorophyll. Our trophic state sits on the border between mesotrophic (moderate nutrients and clarity) and eutrophic (excess nutrients, lower clarity), and over recent years it has been trending toward the healthier mesotrophic end. The long-term Trophic State Index below tells that story better than any single year can.

Trophic State



Horsehead Lake – Deep Hole Trophic State Index. Lower values indicate better water quality.

Routine water-quality and clarity (Secchi) sampling resumes through the open-water season. As a reminder, clarity readings on our lake are sometimes obscured by weeds rather than true cloudiness of the water — something we continue to track with the DNR.

Spring Fishery Update — Watch the Bluegill Beds

There is good news on the fishery. Last spring's DNR survey was very encouraging: both bluegill and crappie were found in a healthy range of sizes from 2" to 12", and the DNR concluded that our stocking efforts have jump-started both fisheries. As approved at the annual meeting, there are now NO catch-and-release restrictions for bluegill or crappie on Horsehead Lake.

This is where you come in. Nate Lederman of WI DNR Fisheries asked us to **monitor the bluegill spawning beds this spring** to see whether the fish are reproducing on their own. Bluegills are easy to spot — they spawn in shallow, sandy-bottomed shorelines (typically late May into June), while crappies spawn in deeper water with more vegetation. Because the fishery is responding well, the District has budgeted \$0 for fish stocking this year — the DNR does not recommend additional stocking at this time.

How you can help this season: if you have bluegill beds along your shoreline, count them and note any change from past years; and through the summer, keep a rough tally of the number and size of bluegills you catch and release. Share what you see with any commissioner — it directly helps the DNR judge whether stocking is working.

Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) — Volunteers Wanted

Keeping aquatic invasive species out of Horsehead Lake is one of the most important things we can do, and early detection is the key. This year's budget includes \$4,000 for an aquatic plant study / AIS survey and sets aside \$3,500 to remove AIS weeds should any be found. Alongside that professional survey, there is a great opportunity for residents to get directly involved through the Citizens Lake Monitoring Network (CLMN).

Paul Skawinski, the CLMN/SWIMS coordinator at UW-Stevens Point, offers an AIS sampling equipment pack — a sampling rake, identification manual, and more — for volunteer monitoring. There are two ways to take part: sampling at the boat launch (where invasives are most likely to be introduced) or meander-sampling by boat around the lake.

Hands-on training: Paul is hosting a **three-day seminar at Kemp Station in Woodruff, WI on June 23–25, 2026**. You'll learn identification techniques and get on-the-water training in how to use the sampling gear. Bring your own kayak or canoe if you'd like to do the on-lake portion.

Interested in becoming an AIS volunteer or attending the training? Contact **Kevin Collins** (HLPRD), or reach Paul Skawinski directly at pskawins@uwsp.edu to register or order equipment. Even one or two volunteers monitoring our launch can make a real difference.

Weed Harvesting — Outlook for 2026

Horsehead’s dense aquatic plant growth can make boat travel difficult, so we mechanically harvest when needed — always within the environmental guidelines of our Comprehensive Lake Management Plan (Onterra, 2020). Last summer we harvested 4.17 acres on the west side of the lake over three days, removing about 8,400 cubic feet of vegetation.

Looking ahead, members voted at the annual meeting to **increase the 2026 weed harvesting budget to \$20,000** (up from \$10,000). As in past years, the Weed Harvesting Survey Committee will tour the lake in early summer to assess weed density and schedule harvesting where it is most needed.

Want to help assess the lake? The survey committee always welcomes volunteers — let a commissioner know if you’d like to join the early-summer tour.

FY 2025–2026 Budget & Your Taxes

Each year, members approve the District’s operating budget at the annual meeting. Our fiscal year runs September 1 through August 31. Here is a summary of the approved budget for FY 2025–2026 compared with the prior year:

Budget Category	FY 2024–25	FY 2025–26
Administration & Operations	\$4,475	\$4,125
Information & Education	\$1,600	\$1,700
Lake Management	\$30,950	\$39,150
Contingency Fund	\$3,000	\$3,000
Total Operating Expenses	\$40,025	\$47,975
Capital – 2nd Aerator Loan Payment	\$13,217	\$13,217
Total Operating + Capital	\$53,242	\$61,192

Where the money goes: The bulk of our spending is lake management. This year’s biggest items are weed harvesting (\$20,000), aeration — power plus preventive maintenance (\$3,300 + \$5,000), the aquatic plant study/AIS survey (\$4,000), an AIS removal reserve (\$3,500), DO sensor maintenance (\$1,100), and access road upkeep (\$2,000). Fish stocking is \$0 this year on DNR guidance.

What it means for your tax bill: Because of the larger budget (chiefly the increased weed harvesting) and a lower carryover, the District tax levy for this year is **\$46,011.88**, and the mill rate rose to **\$1.22 per \$1,000** of equalized property value (up from \$0.67). For a property valued at \$100,000, that works out to about **\$121.78** in District tax this year, compared with roughly \$67.45 last year. The full approved budget is available on our website.

Fishing & Boating Reminders

- **Catch & Release:** There are NO catch-and-release restrictions for bluegill or crappie on Horsehead Lake.

- **Northern Pike:** Per DNR guidance, please continue to harvest smaller northern pike to encourage a better size distribution. If you don't eat them, consider freezing them and donating to Wild Instincts (4621 Apperson Drive, Rhinelander, WI 54501) — they keep coolers outside their doors for fish donations.
 - **Boat Landing:** Please avoid power loading at the ramp — it shifts the lake bottom into a berm near the launch.
 - **Wake-Enhancing Boats:** The Town of Lake Tomahawk ordinance (enacted July 10, 2025) prohibits using ballast tanks/bags or fins, continuous operation at transition speed, or running a boat in an artificially bow-high manner to create an enhanced wake. This protects our shorelines, nesting loons, fish habitat, and water quality on shallow lakes like ours.
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Website Modernization & ADA Compliance

Our District website is getting a much-needed update — and this one is required by law. Under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and an updated U.S. Department of Justice rule, special districts like ours must make our website accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities. The standard is WCAG 2.1 Level AA, and the federal compliance deadline is April 26, 2027. Even though we are run entirely by volunteers, the rule still applies to us, just as it does to towns, counties, and school districts.

A technology subcommittee — **Dusten Tornow, Kirsten Tornow, Tracy Hougum, Alan Hougum, and James Watters** — is leading the effort. An audit of the current site (horseheadlake-wi.org) found several accessibility gaps to fix, including missing image alt text, form labels, heading structure, color contrast, and untagged PDF documents. The subcommittee is now evaluating accessible website providers and will bring a recommendation and rough costs to the commissioners; anything above the bid threshold will go out to public bid.

Beyond meeting the law, a modern site means information that is easier to read and navigate, works on phones and tablets, and is far easier for future volunteers to maintain. The goal is a website that serves its real purpose — agendas, meeting minutes, the welcome packet, newsletters, contacts, and our lake management plans — without the clutter.

We want your input. Tell us what you actually use on the website and what matters most to you. Share your thoughts with any commissioner.

Welcome Our New County Representative

After three years representing Horsehead Lake, **Lenore Lopez** has been reassigned from the Oneida County Conservation/UW committee to the Forestry committee following the last election. We are grateful to Lenore for her dedicated service to our District and wish her well in her new role.

Stepping in as our new Oneida County representative is **Dan Hess**. Dan has fished Horsehead Lake before and is glad to have been appointed to represent our Lake District. Please direct county-related communications to him at Dhess@oneidacountywi.gov. Welcome aboard, Dan!

Annual Meeting & Commissioner Meetings

- **Commissioner Meeting:** Saturday, June 27, 2026 — held via Zoom (watch the website and your email for the link).
- **Annual Meeting:** Saturday, August 1, 2026 @ 9:00 a.m., Sloan Center, Lake Tomahawk — in-person attendance preferred.

At this year's annual meeting, the board plans to discuss a full shift to electronic newsletter distribution, the website modernization recommendation, and the year's lake-management work. We hope to see you there — your voice and your vote shape how we care for the lake.

Join Us Online — New Resident Facebook Group

We are delighted to welcome **Tracy Hougum** as the District's new **Lake Social Coordinator!** To help neighbors stay connected between newsletters, Tracy has created a **private Facebook group, "Horsehead Lake Resident Community,"** just for residents of the lake. It's a friendly place to share photos, ask questions, post lake conditions and ice-on/ice-off sightings, coordinate get-togethers, and keep up with what's happening around the water. **All residents are encouraged to join!**



Scan to join the "Horsehead Lake Resident Community" group.

How to join with the QR code:

1. Open the camera app on your smartphone.
2. Point it at the QR code above — no need to take a photo; a link will pop up on the screen.
3. Tap the link to open the Facebook group.
4. Tap "Join Group" and answer a couple of quick membership questions.
5. A group admin will approve your request, since it's a private group for lake residents.

Prefer to type it in? Search Facebook for "Horsehead Lake Resident Community," or go to facebook.com/groups/horseheadlake.

Stay Informed — Go Paperless

Important — this is the LAST newsletter the District will mail as a printed copy. Beginning with our next issue, we will share newsletters electronically only. Going paperless saves the District meaningful postage and printing costs and gets news to you faster.

Here is how to keep getting District news and updates:

- **By email:** send your email address to horseheadlakePRD.sec@gmail.com and we will add you to the newsletter list.
- **On our website:** every spring and fall newsletter is posted at www.horseheadlake-wi.org.
- **On Facebook:** join our private “Horsehead Lake Resident Community” group at facebook.com/groups/horseheadlake (see the QR code above) for updates between issues.

Don't have email or prefer print? Please let a commissioner know so we can make sure you still stay informed.

Thank You to Our Volunteers

Everything the District does runs on volunteer time. A heartfelt thank-you to:

- **Lake Social Coordinator:** Tracy Hougum
- **Website & Technology Subcommittee:** Dusten Tornow, James Watters, Alan Hougum, Tracy Hougum, Kirsten Tornow
- **Aerator Monitoring:** Dave Averbeck
- **Water Quality Sampling:** Kevin Collins
- **Dissolved Oxygen Testing:** Paul Bursik, Kevin Collins
- **Audit Committee:** Charles Konsitzke
- **Ice On/Off Tracking:** Jane Rosner
- **Welcome Packet:** Tracy Hougum
- **2027 Lake Plan Update** - Dave Averbeck and Kevin Collins.

We are always looking for additional volunteers — for AIS monitoring, the weed-harvesting survey, winter DO testing, and more. **If you can help, let any commissioner know. Thank you, and we'll see you on the water.**

