

## Early History of the Region

For hundred of years prior to the arrival of Europeans, various native tribes established scattered villages in the vicinity of the Pelican Chain of Lakes. In the 1700 and 1800's population was still sparse, and there was very little disturbance of natural systems. With permanent European settlements arriving in 1870's, logging and agriculture began. By 1900 the area that would become the Pelican River Watershed District had experienced significant deforestation. Lakes had been dammed and rivers straightened for the Pelican River Navigation System, which was responsible for stimulating a tourist industry based upon summer cottages and resorts. With the arrival of the automobile, the tourist business exploded, so that the area's population reached 5000 by 1920. At about the same time, major ditching to enhance agriculture caused further and quite profound changes to the lakes, streams and wetlands.

Local awareness of lake water problems began in the late 1940's as lake use intensity and shoreline densities increased. In the 1950's and 1960's, as the area's population reached 9500, instances of algae blooms and nuisance weed growth began to interfere with recreational use of lakes. There was growing suspicion that inadequate sewage treatment were major culprits. Desperate lake dwellers formed lake associations, started lawsuits, and experimented with chemicals to treat the symptoms of lake deterioration. Business leaders, as well as city and county officials feared negative impacts on lake-oriented tourism.

## Establishment of Pelican River Watershed District

In 1965, both the Melissa and Sallie Improvement Association and the Lake Detroiters, advocated for a governmental unit that would be able to address lake problems. Dr. Tom Rogstad, President of Lake Detroiters, led a delegation, including Attorney Robert Irvine and Detroit Lakes City Engineer Winston Larson, to St. Paul to seek enabling legislation that would make it possible to create a local government unit for purposes of "finding causes and solutions for lake eutrophication problems". They brought a draft bill to Senator Norman Walz of Detroit Lakes, but soon learned that a watershed district created under the auspices of the State's 1955 Watershed Act, would serve the purpose if that Act was slightly amended to allow lakes and the lands that drained to them, to be defined as a watershed. The necessary amendments were enacted, and the PRWD was the first watershed district to organize under the amended law.

On September 15, 1965 a copy of a petition asking for the creation of the Pelican River Watershed District was filed with the Minnesota Water Resources Board. The petitioners, seeking to slow down the eutrophication of the lakes, among other purposes, were the Becker County Commissioners. After public meetings and discussion where local officials and the business community offered strong support, the petition was amended slightly and submitted by both the Becker County and Otter Tail Commissioners.

The proposed boundaries of the District were subsequently reviewed in detail and modified by the Director of the Division of Waters. This process was based upon existing maps and detailed field surveys in the fall of 1965 and winter of 1966. The Director considered several lakes included in the original petition as having doubtful surface water links to the main chain of lakes; these included Spear, Pearl and Loon lakes, west of Lake Sallie, and Wine, Brandy, and several others lying west of highway 59 and North of Highway 10. On the other hand, the Director recommended inclusion of those lakes, as well as Mill Lake and Buck's Mills Dam, and some additional tributaries to Lake Melissa and Mill Lake, including some in Otter Tail County.

The first board of directors of the newly-formed Pelican River Watershed District was organized Monday, June 13, at a meeting in the Graystone Manor in Detroit Lakes.

Directors, reading left to right, are: Clem Hagerty; Donald E. Johnson, treasurer; Dr. T. A. Rogstad, president; J. N. (Jack) Given, secretary, and DeWitt Clason. All are from Detroit Lakes.

The men were named to one-year terms by the Minnesota State Water Resources Board,

according to George Loughland of Golden Valley, chairman of the state board.

According to legal description, the general purpose of the watershed district is to "conserve and make provident use of waters and other natural resources, to reduce the pollution of the waters of the Pelican River Chain of lakes, to slow down the eutrophication of the lakes."

"To regulate the water levels in the Pelican River Chain of Lakes, to enhance their rec-

reational facilities, and to protect and improve the scenic beauty thereof.

"To improve the needed drainage, to provide needed soil and water conservation practices on the land; and for other purposes as found in the Minnesota Watershed Act, pursuant to the provisions of Minnesota Laws of 1955, Chapter 799, as amended."

The area involved in the district is about 131 square miles in both Becker county and Otter Tail county.



On March 30, 1966 the Water Resources Board held a hearing at the Becker County Courthouse. The Director's report was presented and oral testimony on it and other matters was heard. At the May 27<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Water Resources Board, the Pelican River Watershed District, as previously defined and delimited by the Director, was ordered. The order specifically noted that addressing pollution would be central to the District's mission. It also noted that navigation, soil erosion, and fish and wildlife enhancements, would be District purposes.

The official order also appointed Thomas Rogstad, DeWitt Clason, John Given, Clem Hagerty, and Donald Eugene Johnson to one-year terms as managers of the new District.



The board of managers of the Pelican River Watershed District are pictured above. Left to right are J. N. Given, Clem Hagerty, Donald Johnson, DeWitt Clason and Dr. T. A. Rogstad.

The first Meeting of the Managers of the Pelican River Watershed District took place at the Graystone Manor Hotel in Detroit Lakes at 6 PM on June 13, 1966. The previously mentioned managers were all present. Also present were Erling Weiberg, Administrative Secretary of the Minnesota Water Resources Board, Jim Dixon, of the Melissa Sallie Improvement Association, and Dick Hecock. Officers were elected as follows: T.A. Rogstad, President, J.N. Given, Secretary, D.E. Johnson, Treasurer. There was discussion of the preparation of the District's Overall Plan, the appointment of an Advisory Committee, development of by-laws, and the identification of source of funds.

Why does the PRWD not include all of the Pelican River watershed, and why, in particular, was PRWD not combined with Cormorant Lakes WD which was created at about the same time and for the same purposes? According to a 1970 letter written to a Pelican Lake resident by Erling M. Weiberg of the Minnesota Water Resources Board, the decision had to do with two main factors:

the original petition for establishment of WD was urged by residents of Detroit, Long, Sallie, Melissa, and Floyd; no other area interests were presented by petition, or advocated by testimony at public hearings which were noticed to all residents of Becker and Otter Tail Counties. The Water Resources board took the position that they could not define a watershed district to include areas from which no petition was received, especially when the area was in a different county.

In fact, the petitioners for Cormorant Lakes and Pelican River watershed districts had been urged by the Water Resources Board to form a single watershed district; this suggestion was rejected on grounds that the problems were different between the two proposed districts (PRWD was more "urban" vs. and Cormorant Lakes "more rural"); moreover, residents near Lake Eunice and Maud, located between the two proposed districts, were adamantly opposed (in hearings) to inclusion in any watershed district.

## The Mission

Acting on a nominating petition submitted on September 15, 1965, the Minnesota Water Resources Board (MWRB) established the Pelican River Watershed District (PRWD) on May 27, 1966. In explaining its action, the Board found that the...

*"principal bodies of water in the upper reaches of the watercourse of the Pelican River, Detroit Lake, Lake Sallie and Lake Melissa, have become at certain times during the summer recreational months, unhealthy and unsightly due to excessive weed and algae growths. Such undesirable growths along the shores of the above lakes have interfered with boating, fishing and swimming; and have denied lake home owners the enjoyment of water scenery. In addition, weeds and algae growths have affected lake property value." (MWRB, 1966)*

The perception that water quality conditions of area lakes were rapidly deteriorating was the primary motivation for proposing a watershed district, and guided formulation of the District's **1967 Overall Plan** and the subsequent efforts of the District Managers (PRWD, 1967). These efforts have included research, advocacy of sewer projects and improvement of sewage treatment facilities, aquatic plant harvesting activities, control of exotic aquatic species, and many other conservation and enhancement activities.

On March 17, 1994, the District Managers formally adopted a **new mission statement**. Rooted in its original MWRB charge, and sustained for 50 years by 29 Managers and their advisors, the District affirms its central interest in the water quality of the Upper Pelican River chain of lakes:

*"The mission of the Pelican River Watershed District is to enhance the quality of water in the lakes within its jurisdiction. It is understood that to accomplish this, the District must ensure that wise decisions are made concerning the management of streams, wetlands, lakes, groundwater, and related land resources which affect these lakes."*

## A Cooperative Spirit

The District owes its origins to the concerns and visions of a broad range of people and organizations. City and County officials, local representatives of state and federal governments, lake associations, lake property owners, businesses and local professionals, were all part of the effort to establish PRWD.

In subsequent years, this ethic continued in several forms. The early managers, themselves broadly representative of the local business and professional community, recruited an advisory committee comprised of 21 people, including governmental officials, elected representatives, businessmen, lakeshore property owners, and lake association members. The advisory committee prepared the Overall Plan which governed the activities of the District for a large part of its history.

Most of the District's projects and other activities were jointly conceived and funded. Especially noteworthy was the involvement of the City of Detroit Lakes. For example, the City worked closely with the District in developing its state-of-the-art sewage treatment plant and evaluating its impact. Extending sewage treatment areas, and stormwater treatment, and water quality monitoring often have been joint efforts. Similarly, the District worked closely with County officials in its acquisition of land for Dunton Locks Park and road-upgrading projects. Weed harvesting projects were advocated and paid for by lakeshore residents, sometimes with support from State and local governments. District managers and staff often were called upon by state and local governments to review proposals that might have some impacts on area lakes. Local politicians were often instrumental in obtaining funds for District efforts.

From its inception, the District has perceived itself as a coordinating agency. Not only were the District's goals of protection of lake water quality, and its enhancement widely-shared, but they usually have been accorded a high priority among residents and officials. Only rarely in its 50 years did the District's programs or practices become the target of citizen or governmental animus.

