

## 2007 – 02 SALE OF ST. LOUIS COUNTY TAX FORFEITED LANDS

- Large corporate lands in Northern Minnesota have either been leased or sold to investment groups with the result being the loss of public access to those lands in the last few years. These corporate timber company lands were previously open to hunters and the public for recreation, their sale impacts access not only to corporate lands, but also to parcels of public land isolated within the corporate lands. This affects hundreds of thousands of forested acres in Northern Minnesota, further emphasizing the great need to retain the vast majority of public lands in public ownership.
- Chapter 92.45 of Minnesota State Statutes expressly prohibits the sale of tax-forfeited riparian lands unless reviewed and recommended for sale by the DNR commissioner and the state legislature. The presumption of 92.45 is that the land should not be sold unless for an over-riding public benefit. The county's obligation is to make that analysis and inform the public for their input in a timely fashion. This intent is not being followed. Riparian lands are currently being put up for sale without consideration of the benefits of public ownership.
- The DNR is not allowed to recommend lands for retention based on public hunting land base, green space, or wildlife habitat; the county is responsible for such evaluations. These factors have not been considered, and public input has not been sought before tax-forfeited lands are proposed for sale.
- DNR staff are not given sufficient time for review of riparian land sales, and thus sufficient environmental review cannot be completed.
- St. Louis County is a member of the St. Louis River Board and in agreement with the goals and objectives defined in the St. Louis River Management Plan. The Plans Land Use Objectives and Principles identify public participation, shoreland protection and land acquisition as important aspects to effective management of land adjacent to the St. Louis River and its tributaries. Sale of shoreline parcels within the riparian corridor is contrary to the intent of the St. Louis River Management Plan.
- In addition to riparian lands, many parcels with a high percentage of wetlands are put up for sale. Development is inappropriate in these wetland areas.
- The St. Louis County Land Department currently has a Geographic Information System based model to help decide which parcels to retain or keep in public ownership. This model needs to be revisited and reviewed by the public during the Land Department planning process. The Izaak Walton League is particularly concerned that the model emphasizes the sale of riparian lands and lands closer to developed areas where the lands are more available to the public.

- Tax-forfeited lands in areas surrounding the Duluth and Iron Range communities, while seemingly separated from larger blocks of public land, still provide public benefit that outweighs returning most of the parcels to private ownership. These lands help control urban sprawl and contribute immensely to the rural character of the townships and cities in which they are located.
- The tax-forfeited lands provide for a quality of life, hunting opportunities and watershed protection not found in areas without public lands. It is imperative that these lands be retained for future generations.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, the Minnesota Division Izaak Walton League of America in convention at Bloomington, Minnesota, April 29, 2007 calls for a moratorium on the disposal of St. Louis County tax-forfeited lands until a plan regarding the long-term management and retention of St. Louis County lands is put in place. The planning process should have public review integrated throughout.

*Submitted W. J. McCabe Chapter*