

Natural Resources Inventory

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Region has strong resource base

The abundance of natural resources in the Twin Cities metropolitan area is one of the region's greatest assets. Three rivers, a thousand lakes, extensive wetlands, native prairies and woodlands, prime soils and aggregate are among the resources that provide residents with valuable nature-based experiences and serve as a key element in the regional quality of life.

Strong growth poses potential threat

These resources are potentially threatened as the region continues to grow. The Council forecasts that the area's population will grow by nearly one million people between 2000 and 2030.

Loss of open space has the potential to significantly impact our quality of life and wildlife habitat areas. Buildings, roads, parking lots and other changes to the natural landscape promote the flow of polluted runoff into the region's lakes and streams.

Important natural areas that allow rainwater to replenish

our underground water sources, provide habitat and serve other important natural functions remain undeveloped and/or have not been acquired for public use. Opportunities to conserve these natural lands become more expensive – and less available – with each passing year.

In Council surveys of metro area residents, the vast majority agrees that “as areas develop, governments should do more to protect natural features.”

Identifying areas for protection

The Metropolitan Council has developed an overall regional plan for accommodating growth called the *2030 Regional Development Framework*.

The *Framework* and its supporting system plans for transportation, water resources and regional parks are directed at meeting the needs of current and future residents, using land sensibly and “preserving vital natural areas and resources for future generations.”

The Council works in concert with local communities to meet these goals.

To make sound decisions about resource protection, the region needs to know where regionally significant natural resources are located.

The Council and the Minnesota Department of Resources have developed a critical tool in that effort. It is called the Natural Resources Inventory and Assessment (NRI/A).

A resource inventory

The NRI/A is a region-wide geographic database and series of maps. The NRI/A records valuable information about land and water resources that:

- Perform significant ecological functions.
- Contain important habitat for animals that are sensitive to habitat fragmentation and destruction.
- Provide opportunities for people to experience nature and the region's historical landscapes.

The NRI/A builds on existing information, such as Minnesota County Biological Survey data, to provide a comprehensive look at natural resources. The NRI/A reveals that roughly 100,000 acres of regionally

significant natural lands remain unprotected in the metro area, compared to 280,000 acres of total natural lands and 1.9 million acres of land overall.

Using the NRI/A

The Council is using the information from the NRI/A to help promote and support the integration of natural resource protection in both local and regional planning. Natural resource planning is a required element of the local comprehensive plans developed by cities, though integration of the NRI, specifically, is not. However, the Council encourages local governments to use the NRI/A as a tool in their comprehensive plans.

Local governments can use the NRI/A as a starting point to identify locally important resources and then take appropriate conservation measures. New development can be located and designed in such a way that preserves environmentally sensitive areas and thus benefit the natural environment.

The Council is also using the NRI/A as it plans to expand existing regional parks and acquire new ones. Other

regional stakeholders, such as environmental groups, land trusts and others are encouraged to use the NRI/A in making decisions about lands to protect.

An electronic atlas

The NRI/A electronic atlas is a collection of six GIS (geographic information systems) applications. These applications organize available natural resource data to provide users with a basic foundation for spatial information and analysis that can help guide discussion, planning and policy. The six applications include Natural Resource Protection (aquatic and terrestrial); Working Lands; Outdoor Recreation; Public Health and Safety; and Community Character. The atlas is available on CD-ROM and comes with an instruction booklet.

Over time the Council and DNR will update, in partnership with local communities, the NRI/A.

Moving ahead

The Council in 2004 established a Natural Resources Task Force. It charged the task

force with developing a coordinated conservation program to protect regionally important natural resource areas and wildlife corridors of regional importance in the seven-county metropolitan area.

The task force had 14 representatives from the private and public sectors with expertise in natural resource protection. It met from March 2004 through early 2005, and issued a report in March 2005.

The report made a variety of findings, conclusion and recommendations. Read the report at:

<http://www.metrocouncil.org/resources/resources.htm>

For more information

- To learn more: Contact Ann Beckman at the Council, at 651-602-1669.
- Related fact sheets:
 - [Regional Parks](#)
 - [Water Resources Planning](#)

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