

Water WoRDs

Updates from the Water Resources Division

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Critical Dunes... in the Winter?

Happy New Year! Although we have not lost sight of our 2012 accomplishments in the rearview mirror quite yet, we in the WRD are looking forward to challenges ahead in 2013. One of those is really a remnant issue from the summer of 2012: changes to the authorizing statute for the WRD's Critical Dunes Program. We will be honest; when these changes passed in August, the mood was a bit tense around here with many staff concerned about the future of Michigan's unparalleled freshwater dunes.

So here we are, with winter well upon us, talking about an iconic feature of Michigan summers. As it turns out, winter is a pretty busy season for staff working in the Critical Dunes Program (many beach communities prohibit construction during the summer months to avoid disruption of people's enjoyment of our Great Lakes shores) so we thought it would be a good time to provide an update on what's been happening since August.

Revisions to Part 353, Sand Dunes Protection and Management, of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act were signed by Governor Snyder on August 7, 2012. The new law requires the WRD to holistically evaluate how projects proposed within regulated areas affect the diversity, quality, and functions within the critical dune area. So now, in addition to our historic evaluation of slope we'll be examining diversity, quality, and function or "DQF" to better recognize the cumulative effects of uses within regulated dunes. One thing the legislation does not do: alter the footprint of designated critical dunes.



Cathead Bay, Leelanau County



Southern Mason County

While the WRD is authorized by statute to appoint a committee to evaluate the atlas of critical dunes and make recommendations to the legislature for revisions, there are no plans in the foreseeable future to do so.

Now, what DQF actually means in practice is something we have spent a good deal of time thinking about in the past few months. When the Legislature and Governor pass and sign changes to the statutes that we in the WRD are obligated to implement, the critical "how to" tends to rest with the agency. To meet that challenge, the WRD added to the ranks of our traditional dunes program staff to build in some expertise from our aquatic biologists who have long implemented procedures to evaluate aquatic habitats through the lens of... you guessed it, DQF! Although the acronyms may differ, at the end of the day this new ecosystem-level approach to dunes permitting is something the WRD is pretty comfortable with. In addition, we are very grateful for the input provided by Suzanne DeVries-Zimmerman and Dr. Ed Hansen from Hope College and many others who have shared their tremendous expertise and passion for Michigan's sand dunes. There will of course be questions as permit applications start to come in and we'll do our best to provide speedy answers to them all. Anticipating certain questions, we've prepared a short [Question & Answer document](#) discussing what the new legislation does and what it means to us in the WRD as we go about our jobs of processing permit applications... sometimes out in the snow.



Michelle Hohn of the WRD's Grand Rapids District office working in the snow

What do you do in the WRD?

Meet Linda Hansen

I work in Field Operations for the WRD, covering Houghton, Keweenaw and Baraga Counties in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I am a 6-year resident of the City of Houghton, and currently work out of the DNR Operations Service Center in the nearby town of Baraga, Michigan. If you have never visited Michigan's far north, please consider a visit; it's a truly beautiful place to live and work. My job includes a variety of water resources-related tasks including working with the public on understanding state regulations, reviewing and issuing permits, and assisting with grant-funded cleanup projects on Lake Superior and local inland lakes and streams.

One of my newest tasks has been becoming the local Critical Dunes Area (CDA) steward for my counties. This job is similar to the other regulatory work I do as it involves a specific set of regulations and permit restrictions for construction in and/or use of designated CDAs. Although I am relatively new to this program (I started with MDEQ in August 2012), I am excited to apply my experience and knowledge toward managing this important ecological resource. In particular, I am looking forward to learning more about their vegetative ecosystems and how I can assist property owners in avoiding or reducing impacts to them. This is especially true for the CDAs present in the Keweenaw Peninsula which are relatively small and isolated from other dune communities, making them a unique habitat for the area vulnerable to degradation. I am happy to answer any questions landowners may have regarding Keweenaw-area CDAs by phone at 906 353 7522 or email (HansenL6@michigan.gov), and assist them with their permitting needs.



Linda Hansen at Isle Royale's Mount Ojibway tower during a 2010 backpacking trip