

The Natural Rivers Program

Michigan sportspeople are fortunate to be surrounded by more than 36,500 miles of rivers and streams, 12,500 miles of which are classified as cold water trout streams. We are also fortunate that Michigan has many programs focused on the protection and enhancement of those river resources. One of those programs is the Natural Rivers Program, which is part of Fisheries Division, within the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

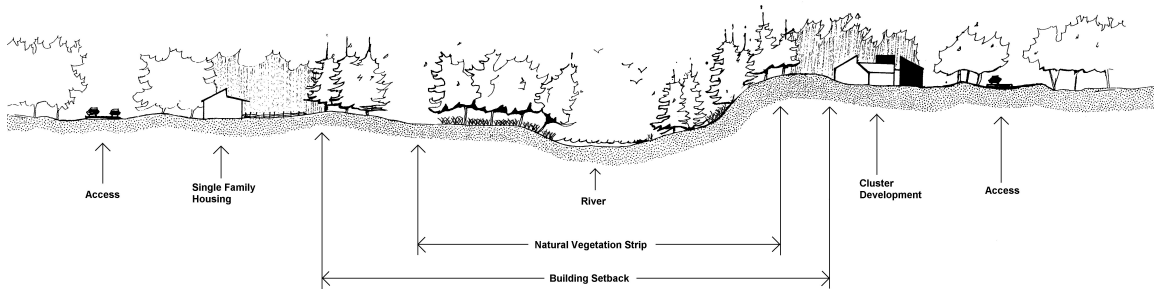
In 1970, the Natural River Act, now known as Part 305 of PA 451 of 1994, was passed into law. The new law authorized the DNR to develop a system of Natural Rivers in the interest of the people of the state and future generation, for the purpose of preserving and enhancing a river's values for a variety of reasons, including; aesthetics, free-flowing condition, recreation, boating, historic, water conservation, floodplain, and fisheries and wildlife habitat.

Since 1970, 2,091 miles on sixteen rivers or segments of rivers have been designated into Michigan's Natural River System. In the order they were designated, those river systems include the Jordan, Betsie, Rogue, Two Hearted, White, Boardman, Huron, Pere Marquette, Flat, Rifle, Lower Kalamazoo, Pigeon, AuSable, Fox, Pine and Upper Manistee rivers.

The designation process begins by development of a comprehensive river management plan written by a working committee known as an advisory group. Advisory groups include essentially any group, agency, unit of government, property owner or citizen with an interest in the process and in protecting the river system being studied. The management plan contains background and baseline data about the river system being studied, as well as the proposed river segments to be designated and the recommended public and private land development standards.

We will now skip past the details of draft plans, public hearings, the N.R.C. and promulgation of rules, to the administration of the Program. What makes the Natural Rivers Program effective as a management tool are the development standards and their influence on private, as well as public lands. Because all lands, public and private, within the Natural River district (400 feet on either side of a designated river) are included in the designation, a seamless corridor of protected land is the result.

Development standards typically include structural and septic system setbacks (100-200 feet from the water's edge), native vegetation protection (25-100 feet from the water's edge), minimum lot size and frontage requirements (one acre with 100-200 feet of frontage), and prohibit filling or building within the 100-year floodplain or wetlands. The standards also limit uses to residential development and address timber harvest, oil and gas activity, public access, riverbank stabilization and fisheries habitat projects, and management of public lands.



Another important aspect of Part 305, Natural Rivers that makes it effective is the ability of local units of government to adopt Natural River zoning standards to become the Program administrators on private lands within their jurisdiction. Partnerships with local units of government are critical to the effectiveness of the Program, as nearly 60% of designated mileage is currently subject to locally administered Natural River zoning.

On the ground administration of the Program works through a permit process, similar to any local zoning permit. In state-zoned areas, a property owner applies for a state Natural River zoning permit. Program staff review the application for completeness then schedule an on-site inspection to verify information and meet with a land owner if needed. When the development standards are met, a permit is issued within a few days. If the development standards can not be met due to a variety of circumstances, a variance may be requested from the Zoning Review Board (ZRB). The ZRB is a seven member board comprised of representatives from each affected County, Township, NRCS, local citizens and the DNR.

In a locally zoned area, the Natural River permit review process becomes part of the affected County or Township zoning ordinance, and is administered as any other district within their jurisdiction. Permits are applied for and received at the local level. In locally zoned areas, Natural River staff become involved in review of local ordinance language amendments, comment on variance request, and assist in compliance activities when needed. Locally zoned areas are routinely monitored to ensure uniformed administration within each river system.

Along with local units of government, the Program relies on many other partners who work close to the resource. Watershed councils, RC&D's, US Forest Service, TU chapters, canoe livery owners, and DEQ staff to name a few.

For more information regarding the Natural Rivers Program, please visit our web site at <http://www.michigan.gov/dnr>.

The Natural Rivers Program is part of the Habitat Management Unit within Fisheries Division of the Department of Natural Resources. Steve Sutton is the Natural Rivers Program Manager and shamelessly plagiarized from the works of other NR staff. Steve can be reached at 517-241-9049 or SuttonsL@michigan.gov