



Higgins Lake Property Owners Association

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To Protect, Preserve and Enhance the Quality of Higgins Lake and Its Surrounding Watershed

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President's Message



Fall arrived abruptly just after Labor Day with wild westerly winds, driving rain, and cold, cold temps. The unusually low lake level increased the challenge for these Almeda Beach lifers on a boat haul out rescue mission. Just kidding, warmer temperatures returned for more summer lake days.

Although summer has ended, the work of your HLPOA Board continues year-round. Some of our summer highlights are featured here. More details on these and other projects can be found on our website, hlpoa.org.

Want a head start on your 2026 support? Select the Join tab at hlpoa.org. Also, see below for a new on-line payment option.

Protecting and Preserving Higgins Lake for Future Generations
Charlene Cornell, President HLPOA

Update: Higgins Lake Dam Special Assessment District (SAD)

On September 17th, the Roscommon County Board of Commissioners approved the **Assessment Roll and Computation of Costs** for the proposed Higgins Lake Dam Special Assessment District (SAD). While this decision was disappointing, it was not unexpected.

The SAD shifts the financial responsibility for the Higgins Lake dam from the county to lakefront property owners. The commissioners' discussion made their priorities clear: their focus was not on identifying or solving problems at the dam, but on ensuring the approval was timed so the new assessment could appear on the December **1, 2025, tax bills** for Gerrish and Lyon Township residents.

Despite repeated objections from Higgins Lake residents, the commissioners voted to move forward with collecting money—without a defined project, cost estimate, statutory benefit determination, or the outcome of the **pending appellate court decision** on the HLPOA's challenge to the SAD's creation.

What does this mean for property owners:

The county will now present its Assessment Roll to Lyon and Gerrish Townships, and the assessment will appear as a line item on winter tax bills issued December 1, 2025, and due February 14, 2026. If you are a member of the HLPOA, you are included in this assessment. The assessment is intended to continue indefinitely, with new amounts set in 2026 for the next phase of the SAD's implementation.

Legal context:

The HLPOA filed suit in September 2023 to stop creation of the SAD. A hearing was held before the Michigan Appellate Court on August 6, 2025, but no ruling has been issued. If the court rules against the county, the assessment may be

halted. If the court rules against the HLPOA, the assessment could proceed, though the HLPOA may appeal to the Michigan Supreme Court and request a pause until the appellate process is complete.

In addition, the HLPOA is formally objecting to the Assessment Roll and Computation of Costs approved by the county commissioners. Attorney Ellison will file this objection within the required 15-day period. Nearly 600 residents have signed up in support of our position, demonstrating broad community opposition. Of further note, at their September meeting, the Gerrish Township Board also voted to file an objection.

Key clarifications:

1. The SAD has **nothing to do with controlling the level of Higgins Lake**. That matter has already been decided in court, despite the county's repeated attempts to blur the two issues.
2. The SAD is about **collecting money**. The \$400,000 now being levied is not for fixing the dam, but for legal, administrative, and engineering costs tied to creating and sustaining the district.

Little Green Blobs Growing in Higgins Lake

Many riparians around the lake have noticed lots of little green blobs growing in the shallow waters near shore in these last few weeks of summer. The picture (shown left) taken off the Pine Bluffs Road shoreline shows some of these blobs.



They look like algae and are often commonly referred to as "blue green algae blobs". For reference the size can be compared with the ruler set next to the collection sample. But in fact, they are forms of cyanobacteria which grow in fresh water when molecular nitrogen (e.g. nitrates, nitrites, ammonia) becomes unavailable due to brown algae and aqueous weed consumption, and where phosphorous is still present and available for these blobs to utilize and grow.

The data HLPOA has gathered over the last eight years in the near shore waters of Higgins Lake and in the Cut River show that phosphorous is almost always available in excess while molecular nitrogen is absent, creating ideal conditions for the growth of cyanobacterial forms.

These bacteria metabolize dissolved atomic nitrogen (N₂) from the air with this available phosphorous. As one of these blobs waste products, some atomic oxygen (O₂) is created, which usually dissolves. However, some O₂ likely stays with the blobs, and gives them some buoyancy. Eventually many will break off from the bottom where they grew and float to the surface.

Photo courtesy of John Ogren

Professor Luttenton has suggested that the specimens in the photo probably are of the genus "Gloeotrichia"; one variety of which generates some serious toxins. So just to be safe, one should avoid handling them and should keep pets from ingesting any if they wash upon the shore.

Higgins Lake Swimmers Itch Organization (hlsio.org) Update

The year started off with considerable optimism. HLSIO had our permits in order, both from the DNR and the Roscommon Commissioners, to allow us to capture and relocate mergansers. Both permits were necessary for us to proceed. All systems go. Nope, our optimism soon faded dramatically, as the US Fish & Wildlife on April 14, 2025, canceled all relocation permits for Michigan (and other states) due to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI, also referred to more commonly as Avian Flu).

We then reached out to our DNR permitting specialists (and anyone else we knew), with possible alternatives for their consideration. Unfortunately, we didn't get any response from our repeated efforts to dialog and consideration of our alternatives. We were stuck with no relocation plans once again. We have now not been able to relocate mergansers for three of the past four years. There was little reason for optimism at this point. HLSIO continued with our bird surveys which showed some mergansers on the lake this Spring, resulting in four

broods on the lake for this summer. Additionally, we continued our Water Exposure Study, conducted annually since 2022. This is among users of the lake who report their experience after being in the water. In total there were nearly 300 Reports, representing over 1100 people doing something in the water. Additionally, we had many people reporting cases of SI on our website (HLSIO.org), as well as merganser brood sightings.

The good news is the Water Exposure study showed NO increase in SI prevalence, in fact a slight decline from last year. However, our website reports of SI increased substantially, with over twice as many SI reported cases versus last year. Many of these cases were reported in the latter half of the summer. It is unclear at this time why there is a discrepancy between the two sources of SI reports, whether it is due to more HLSIO.org awareness, or other factors such as precautions taken, etc. That said, we did expect some increase in SI cases due to the broods on the lake. Obviously, there is a reason for concern as we look ahead to 2026.

So, where do we stand going forward.

- Merganser Relocation Status — As we prepare for 2026, we were able to meet with Shannon Lott, Natural Resource Deputy at Michigan DNR. Additional meeting attendees included: Greg Semack, Duncan Lawrence, Dr. Curt Blankespoor, Vicki Springstead (focus; Invasive Species) and Sam Boumis (HLPOA Lobbying Advocate). Thanks to Sam Boumis and Ken Borton (Northern MI State Representative) for facilitating this meeting. We were able to share our concerns and recommendations for next year. Shannon was very receptive and extremely knowledgeable. Particularly encouraging is that she appears supportive of field testing captured Mergansers for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Any merganser captured and testing HPAI positive would be euthanized, while those testing negative could be relocated. This approach would be a huge “win” for HLSIO in 2026. However, Shannon may still be overruled, if Dept. of Agriculture/USFW remains unyielding in relocation. We should know more in the next few months. We intend to have additional meetings later in the year/early 2026 with

Shannon. Of note, we previously have not been able to have open conversations with a DNR senior representative. We appreciate that she may be able to represent our position at any DNR meetings where the fate of relocation may be the topic.

- US Fish & Wildlife (USFW) – There was a letter from the Mississippi Flyway Council (a group of 14 States and 3 Canadian Provinces, dated March 11, 2025, that outlined why there should be NO relocation of ducks going forward, viewing SI as a “discomfort” not a health risk. This letter further stated that no research has demonstrated survivability of hens/broods (not true). HLSIO sent a response on August 21, 2025, that we shared with Mr. Brian Smith Assistant Regional Director of Migratory Birds. This outlined why SI was more than just a “discomfort”, that it could be an economic hardship for Roscommon County. Moreover, that most of the states in this group have no experience or expertise with SI. Additionally, we outlined alternatives we think would address their primary concerns. Our response also included a letter from Ron Alden, the Roscommon Village Manager, emphasizing his concern about the economic impact of a rise in SI cases
- Fundraising Dinner, Thursday August 14 A very successful fundraising dinner was held at Witt’s barn, with the weather being just about perfect. In total, over 120 tickets were sold. Additionally, we received some private donations supporting our cause. This puts us in good shape to fund all activities for 2026. We are tentatively targeting Thursday August 13, 2026, for next year’s event. Thank you to all that attended, as well as those making additional HLSIO contributions!

We continue to work to have merganser relocation reinstated for 2026. If not, field testing for HPAI could be a reasonable solution for all involved. However, if no action is permitted next year, we may expect to see Swimmers Itch cases on the rise going forward. Rest assured, we are taking actions to keep communications open with the DNR and USFW in our efforts to facilitate relocating mergansers in 2026.



Fall Equinox photo courtesy of Charlene Cornell

Impact of Quagga and Zebra Mussels on Lakes

Many of the disastrous impacts of invasive species that have been plaguing the Great Lakes have also been negatively affecting Higgins Lake as well. One of the most severe impacts of this situation has been the huge number of Quagga and Zebra mussels that have completely altered the environment of Higgins Lake.

A lot of research has been done recently, particularly on Lakes Michigan and Huron, which in many ways are similar hydrologically to Higgins Lake. The following article describes the ways in which these mussels move nutrients from the water column by filtering out the algae there, and then depositing the metabolized remains on the bottom of the lakes.

Invasive mussels regulate nutrient cycling in the largest freshwater ecosystem on Earth

(Use the link or copy and paste the URL into your browser)

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7923380/>

South State Park Data Collection Project

This data collection is an ongoing joint project with the Higgins Lake Foundation. In 2023, 581 boat operators were interviewed at the three DNR boat accesses and determined that 85% of the risk of new Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) was at the South State Park. The risk is based on the proportion of visiting boats from other lakes that arrived with visible weeds.

In 2024 the data collection was focused on the South State Park because of the high risk at that location. The HLF student employees interviewed 851 boat operators,

inspected for visible weeds and offered to wash the boats or pull the weeds. The results are as follows:

- 237 **visiting boats**, 10 with visible weeds, 4.2%.
- 9 of 10 accepted to remove weeds.
- Only **one** visiting boat entered the lake with visible weeds while the HLF Students were on duty.
- 614 **local boats**, 60 with visible weeds, 9.8%.
- 52 of 60 accepted the offer to remove weeds.
- The other 8 entered the lake with visible weeds.

This proved the effectiveness of unofficial inspections in reducing the risk of new AIS entering the lake. The inspections were unofficial in that the only student authority came from a smile and wearing yellow safety vests.

The HLF student employees worked 9-noon shifts on busy Saturday and Sunday mornings. What happened when they were not present?

- Based on best estimates, 2,500 to 5,000 additional boats entered the lake at the South State Park.
- About 700-1,400 were visiting boats, 30-60 arrived with visible weeds, 4.2%.
- Of the 1,800-3,600 local boats, 175-350 arrived with visible weeds, 9.8%.
- All the boats had the potential to spread existing AIS from the lagoon to new locations in the lake.

The data collection project at the South State Park continued in 2025 and results will be published in the winter newsletter. Based on the 2024 results of the study and bolstered by expected 2025 results, **the following recommendations will be made to the DNR.**

- Inspect all arriving boats at all three DNR accesses for visible weeds and request, or require, all weeds to be removed before entering the lake.
- Eliminate the lagoon at the South State Park to reduce the risk of new AIS at Higgins Lake and existing AIS from spreading to other lakes. Based on checks in 2023-2025, an average of over 50% of boats and trailers leaving the park carry visible weeds from the lagoon.

Bug Hunters

On September 23, 2025, an enthusiastic crew of volunteers looked for macroinvertebrates in Big Creek and on the Cut River. This is the fifth year of macroinvertebrate sampling, providing a picture of water quality in these streams over time. We are part of the Muskegon River Watershed Assembly program for tracking water quality, using their procedures and expertise. This fall sampling was a repeat of sampling this spring in the same locations, looking for changes in the types and number of insects and other creatures without backbones. The results of the spring sampling showed the Big Creek rated as Good and the Cut River rated as Fair for water quality, a slight improvement for the Cut River over fall of 2024. Fall results should be available in a few weeks.

Thanks to the Townsend and Schmidt families for access to the Cut River and Big Creek, respectively, for sampling and processing. And thanks so much to all our volunteers who help make this work possible and fun!



Duncan and Kathy Lawrence, Fred and Carol Swinehart, Larry Chevrán, Cany Hendrickson, Linda Stevens, John Barta and Mike Purkey.

Online Payment a New Option

The option to make your payment to HLPOA using Venmo, or Credit Card online is now available. To access this service go to the top of the HLPOA website at hlpoa.org and click on “Click to Join/Donate” then select Online Payment. Follow the instructions and click on the blue highlighted link. The online payment option is a convenient way for you to send your membership dues and donations to HLPOA. You can still send your payment by USPO as we have been doing for 91 years.

PayPal is a company providing an online platform for this service. HLPOA is charged a 3.49% processing fee, which is displayed as tax and a .49 cent processing fee which is listed as a shipping fee, both displayed at checkout. The fees are built into the transaction so there is no way to opt out of them. For \$125.00 membership the final price will be seen as \$129.85 on your statement.

PFAS Foam Study on Lakes

Western Michigan University, in partnership with the Michigan Geological Survey, is starting a study on the naturally formed foams on lakes. As property owners, we are asking for your help to identify and report foams we can sample and analyze so we can better understand foams and which chemicals they contain.

What are PFAS?

You may have heard of PFAS, often called “forever chemicals”. The term “PFAS” represents a large family of thousands of individual chemicals. They are in many everyday products, from non-stick pans to stain-resistant carpets. Because they’ve been used for so long, they’re now found everywhere—in our water, soil, and even in the air.

While we’ve learned a lot about PFAS, we still need to learn more about how and which PFAS compounds impact the foam that forms on lakes.

Why are we studying lake foam?

You may have seen bright white foam on your lake's surface or collected along the shoreline. This foam can contain high concentrations of PFAS. For our study, we want to collect samples of this foam to:

Identify the individual PFAS chemicals that cause foam.

Measure how much of each PFAS compound is in the foam.

Better understand the conditions that promote the formation of foam.

This research will help us predict when and where this foam might appear and what's in it. This information is important for you, the property owner, as foams of any kind have always been a concern. Our goal is for this study to be the first step toward understanding PFAS in foams and developing methods to manage this issue.

How you can help

We need your eyes on the lake! By reporting when and where you see foam, you'll help us select the best locations for our research. We're asking Michigan Lakes and Streams members to let us know about any foam sightings by using the form below. *Samples will be collected until October 1, 2026.*

Please note: While all our study results will be kept anonymous (we will not share lake names or specific locations), we can provide the test results for your individual lake to you upon request. We believe it's important to keep you informed.

You can find the form here: <https://arcg.is/1uqe090>

Thank you, Donors:

General Fund: Elizabeth Camp & Pat Weyburne, James & Spring Clarke, Dennis & Nadine Corte, Bruce & Gayle Madison-Hendy, Wendy Leopold, Gail Wadell, John & Margaret Zinkand

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In Memory of Daniel Masterson: Clancy Rehorn

In memory of Bob Williams: Brad & Becky Gibson

2024-2025 HLPOA Board: President - Charlene Cornell, Vice President - Greg Semack, Secretary - Herb Weatherly, Treasurer - Bruce Carleton. Directors: Wayne Brooks, Dennis Corte, Patty Dennis, Curt DeVoe, Becky Gibson, John Ogren and Fred Swinehart. Administrative Assistant - Kathleen Barger.