Volume X, Issue 1

LAKE-GRAM

FALL 2026



NAVIGATING TO CLEANER, SAFER BEACHES

The Yahara chain of lakes provides residents and vistors with opportunities to recreate and connect with the water. A recent Clean Lakes Alliance-commissioned study estimates that the lakes draw 2.7 million visits annually, a measure of what these waters mean to our community.

Water quality affects use, property values, and the more than $220 million our lakes generate annually in regional economic activity. Yet this value is affected each time a beach closes due to high *E. coli* levels. Clean Lakes Alliance's *2025 State of the Lakes* found that *E. coli* caused three-quarters of last summer's tracked closure days.

PARTNERSHIPS IN ACTION

Imagine how much more our lakes could be enjoyed if beach closures were less frequent. Clean Lakes Alliance and Public Health Madison & Dane County (PHMDC) are working to make that possible. The partners launched an enhanced testing pilot this summer at four beaches with above-average closure rates and high stormwater vulnerability: Spring Harbor on Lake Mendota; Olbrich and Esther on Lake Monona; and Vilas on Lake Wingra.

Traditional monitoring measures *E. coli* in the water and triggers closures when levels exceed a set threshold. This pilot goes further. Sampling after rainfall, when bacteria levels often spike, and pairing these samples with DNA analysis will help managers better understand contamination sources and address the root causes.

Dane County and the City of Madison funded sampling costs, while PHMDC led the pilot with support from trained Clean Lakes Alliance staff and volunteers. "Better data will lead to targeted solutions, and, ultimately, more safe swimming days at our beaches," said Bonnie Armstrong, PHMDC Director of Environmental Health.

The effort advances *Renew the Blue: A Community Guide for Cleaner Lakes & Beaches in the Yahara Watershed*. "Expanded monitoring is a high-priority action in the plan to clean up the Yahara lakes," said Clean Lakes Alliance Executive Director James Tye. "What we learn can hopefully steer future investments toward more effective beach-improvement options."

No project will eliminate closures immediately, but this initiative shifts the focus from monitoring to problem prevention. **Learn more about the pilot project results by registering to attend our free Clean Lakes 101 On Tap on Wednesday, October 14, from 4:00–5:00 p.m. at The East Side Club.**

View of B.B. Clarke Beach on Lake Monona



Volunteers assist with land-restoration work within Pheasant Branch Conservancy at a Clean Lakes Alliance Volunteer Day, July 2025

FROM PLAN TO IMPLEMENTATION

Our perception of lake health often starts with what we can see: the water's color or what's floating on the surface. Limnologists (lake scientists) know, however, that conditions are affected by many variables, both seen and unseen. They also know that changes to surrounding lands are a harbinger of what will happen in the water.

That connection lies at the heart of the newly formed Renew the Blue Council. Now representing 46 partner organizations, the Council is a growing coalition working to accelerate recommended lake-improvement actions. It connects governments, nonprofits, and stakeholder associations around the watershed's highest-priority needs. Clean Lakes Alliance serves as the backbone organization, recruiting members and providing facilitation and administrative support through a Collective Impact framework.

The Council's mission is to advance projects that reduce phosphorus, *E. coli*, and stormwater runoff while strengthening relationships and coordination among members. Much of the work happens through **implementation teams** — small, project-focused sub-groups moving specific Renew the Blue priorities from recommendation to action.

THE LAND-WATER CONNECTION

For years, Clean Lakes Alliance's annual *State of the Lakes* has provided a trusted assessment of conditions across the Yahara lakes. Now, the Council is helping expand that report with a more detailed evaluation of watershed health.

Lake improvement begins with better land management. Investments in agricultural conservation, green infrastructure, protected wetlands, and shoreline restoration are helping address runoff and pollution. Yet it can take time for lakes to respond, and climate change is a growing headwind pushing against progress. Meanwhile, measuring actions occurring on the landscape gives us an earlier, clearer view of whether collective efforts are moving in the right direction.

Instead of focusing only on water-quality outcomes, the Council also is working to track implementation. Are more rain gardens being planted? Are municipalities keeping more streets leaf-free? Are more farm acres managed with conservation practices? Are wetlands and other critical landscapes being protected? Each indicator can reveal progress, make work more visible, and show where added investment or collaboration is needed.

TEAM SPOTLIGHT: DEVELOPING THE RIGHT METRICS

One implementation team is developing a practical set of land-health metrics. "What happens on the land affects what happens in the water. By measuring both, we can better understand our progress toward cleaner lakes and healthier communities," said co-chair Jason Valerius, Executive Director of the Capital Area Regional Planning Commission. Example land-health indicators include:

- Municipal leaf-collection operations
- Neighborhood rain gardens and other green infrastructure
- Protected conservation lands
- Agricultural acres covered by Nutrient Management Plans
- Manure-processing capacity and related practices

Clean Lakes Alliance financially contributed to a leaf vacuuming initiative near Lake Kegonsa



The team is not collecting data simply because it exists. Members are asking whether each metric relates directly to reducing phosphorus, *E. coli*, or runoff; whether reliable information is available and can be measured consistently; and whether it will help residents and decision-makers understand progress. Their goal is a concise set of repeatable indicators that can be reported annually, serving as a watershed scorecard that is scientifically credible, practical to maintain, and understandable to the public.

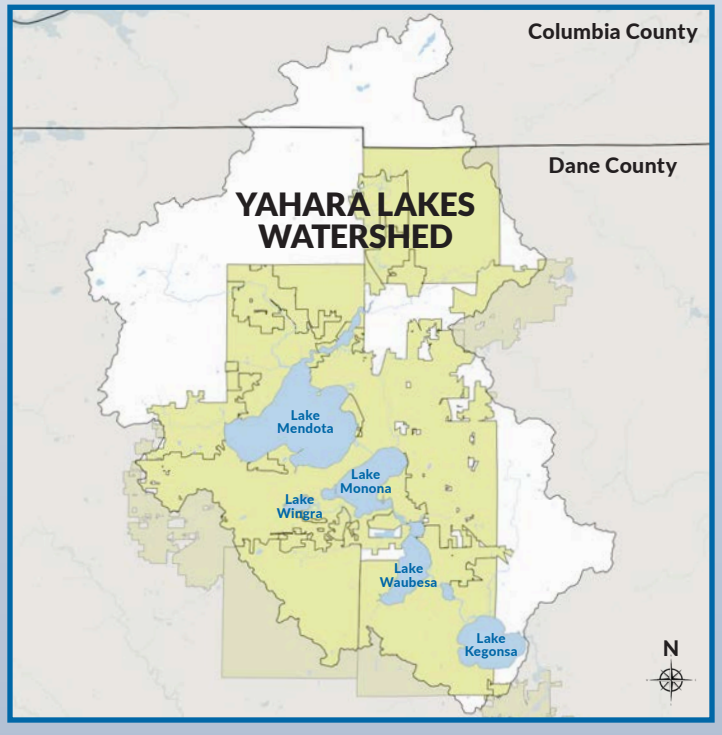
TEAM SPOTLIGHT: REDUCING THE TEA EFFECT

The annual autumn leaf drop shows why land conditions matter as much as water measurements. Leaves commonly collect within street gutters. When rain falls, the decomposing accumulations create a phosphorus-rich "leaf tea" that flows through storm drains to the lakes. The resulting leaf tea represents the largest source of urban phosphorus pollution to the Yahara lakes. The encouraging news comes from a U.S. Geological Survey study conducted in Madison. It reveals frequent leaf collection can reduce phosphorus in urban stormwater by up to 80 percent, demonstrating the value of timely action.

Municipal leaf collection and street sweeping are more than public works. They are water-quality practices. Residents magnify the benefit by moving leaves out of street gutters and onto terraces or into compost bins before rain arrives. That simple, increasingly common habit shows local governments and homeowners working in tandem for the lakes.

Another Council implementation team is exploring how communities can enhance collection and consistently report leaf-free street miles as an indicator of progress. Compared year after year, the metric could help track leaf-free-street program expansions, identify gaps, and encourage investment where it is most needed.

Map of the Yahara Lakes Watershed with cities, villages, and towns currently represented by the Renew the Blue Council highlighted in yellow





Shoreline bank erosion near Picnic Point on Lake Mendota, July 2025

TEAM SPOTLIGHT: TRACKING LAKESHORE CONDITIONS

A third implementation team is addressing the knowledge gap around shoreline health. It is laying the groundwork for a comprehensive baseline inventory of lakeshore conditions, ownership, and use across all five Yahara lakes. Once funded, the assessment is designed to examine vegetation quality, shoreline hardening, bank erosion, stormwater outfalls, and other features that affect runoff, habitat, and water quality. The team also proposes a simple "good-fair-poor" rating for a future *State of the Lakes* status dashboard.

The effort will not grade individual property owners. Rather, it would establish a watershed-wide baseline and create a consistent method for measuring improvement. Combined with other metrics, the inventory would offer a fuller picture of watershed health than in-lake measurements alone.

COLLABORATION AS A FORCE MULTIPLIER

Perhaps the Council's greatest innovation is not a metric at all. It is bringing together organizations that have pursued similar goals, often independently. Delegates are identifying shared priorities, coordinating data collection, and aligning investments. More simply, they are leveraging one another's unique strengths while avoiding duplicated effort.

The Council advances a long-standing Clean Lakes Alliance objective to unite people around shared solutions. Healthy lakes require thousands of landowners, volunteers, government staff, scientists, businesses, farmers, and conservation partners moving in the same direction. Through shared accountability measures and greater collaboration, the Council will help the community judge progress not only by cleaner water, but by healthier landscapes throughout the watershed.

Volunteers plant native grasses on the west end of Olbrich Park near Lake Monona during a Clean Lakes Alliance Volunteer Day, September 2025



WORKING TOWARD LASTING LEGACIES

Many Renew the Blue recommendations were taking shape before the Council formally convened. Land conservation offers a clear example. Protecting wetlands, shoreline buffers, and other critical lands is among the smartest long-term investments for cleaner lakes. By slowing runoff, trapping phosphorus, and sustaining wildlife, they are the focus of some of *Renew the Blue's* highest-impact opportunities.

PARTNERSHIPS IN ACTION

Clean Lakes Alliance continues to unite conservation groups, governments, donors, and residents around key initiatives. Recent successes show what common goals and collaboration can achieve:

- Celebrating the restoration of a 160-acre addition to Pheasant Branch Conservancy in Lake Mendota's headwaters, originally purchased by Dane County. Clean Lakes Alliance advocated for the purchase and financially supported its conversion into a biologically diverse "platinum prairie."

- Adjacent to Lake Kegonsa, neighbors and supporters are on the cusp of securing Lot 3 Sunnyside. Clean Lakes Alliance is serving as the fiscal agent and contributed thousands of dollars in administrative fees to help complete the purchase. Pending the transfer of ownership to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the eight-acre parcel will add accessible conservancy land to Lake Kegonsa State Park and permanently protect lake-adjacent land facing intense development pressures.

- East of Lake Waubesa, Dane County purchased 165 acres beside Lower Mud Lake for donation to the Ho-Chunk Nation. Supported by Clean Lakes Alliance, this partnership opens new possibilities for ecological restoration while honoring Indigenous peoples' enduring cultural and historical ties to these lands.

Clean Lakes Alliance Executive Director James Tye also points to the campaign to fully invest in the Dane County Land Conservation Fund, a critical source of land-protection funding. The campaign mobilized supporters to write letters, testify before the Land Conservation Committee, and share their opinions with County Board supervisors. "Every invested dollar and protected acre," Tye said, "is a commitment to cleaner lakes."

These accomplishments reflect the philosophy that lasting results require people working together. "Each land-conservation success moves us toward cleaner water for generations to come," said Laura Hicklin, Dane County Land & Water Resources Director and member of the Clean Lakes Alliance Community Board and Renew the Blue Council Steering Team. "I'm excited to see all of us working together as partners to help make that a reality."

LAND CONSERVATION EFFORTS AROUND THE YAHARA WATERSHED



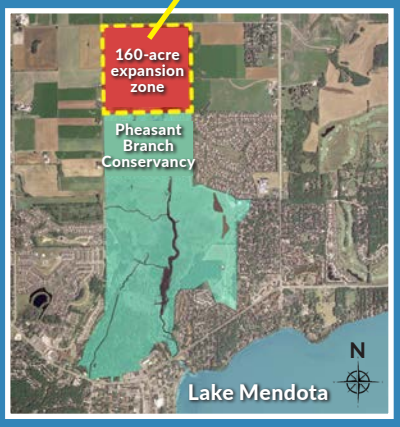
Map of Lot 3 Sunnyside property adjacent to Lake Kegonsa



Map of the property purchased by Dane County for donation to the Ho-Chunk Nation near Lower Mud Lake

Map of Pheasant Branch Conservancy expansion zone showing seed planting years





Map of Pheasant Branch Conservancy showing the 160-acre expansion zone on the north end of the land

YOUR SUPPORT PROPELS US FORWARD



Landscapes essential to our lakes cannot protect themselves. Behind every restored wetland, resilient shoreline, planted prairie, and conserved acre are people who chose to invest in the future. Through Clean Lakes Alliance's Seed the Need campaign, restoration events, advocacy, and partner support, thousands of donors and volunteers have turned ambitious watershed goals into lasting results.

Their investments magnify the power of partnerships that extend far beyond any single organization. The Pheasant Branch Conservancy expansion north of Lake Mendota, protection of Lot 3 Sunnyside near Lake Kegonsa, and efforts to preserve and steward lands near Lake Waubesa show what becomes possible when vision, collaboration, and generosity meet.

Volunteers are equally vital. From water-quality monitoring to project and event support, their time and talent connect people with the watershed while extending the reach of Clean Lakes Alliance and its partners.

The Renew the Blue Council carries that same spirit of shared responsibility. Science, policy, and funding alone cannot restore our lakes. Success requires all of us contributing in ways large and small. Every gift — whether measured in dollars or hours — builds momentum for healthier waters and a thriving community.

As we celebrate partnerships, we offer our sincerest thanks to everyone investing in our mission. You prove that lasting conservation begins not only with respect for the land, but with people who care enough to protect it. Clean Lakes Alliance Board Chair Sopen Shah puts it this way: "Every protected acre tells two stories. One is about the land itself, and the other is about the people and organizations who chose to invest in its future. Thanks to them, the lakes will return the favor many times over."



Clean Lakes Alliance Volunteer Day participants assisting with a land-restoration project at Turville Conservation Park, July 2026



People of all ages participate in the Indigenous Snow Snake Contest at Clean Lakes Alliance's Frozen Assets Festival, February 2026

A SPECIAL PLACE TO WHICH WE BELONG

Water has long connected communities across the Yahara Watershed. Before Madison was established, the region's lakes, wetlands, and oak savannas sustained generations of Indigenous peoples and shaped life in our area. Today, a growing partnership between Clean Lakes Alliance and the Ho-Chunk Nation is helping ensure that caring for these waters includes a greater appreciation for their ecological and cultural history.

Our **Teejop Ecology Initiative** reflects that commitment. In honor of the Ho-Chunk name for Four Lakes (pronounced Day-Jope), the initiative cultivates watershed stewardship through restoration, Indigenous knowledge, and a more engaged public. It is envisioned as an ongoing reminder that ecosystems are built around relationships, with one another and with the land itself.

Effigy mound informational stop at Clean Lakes Alliance's Loop the Lake bike event, June 2026



Aaracgeį Sarah Lemieux-White Eagle, a Clean Lakes Alliance Community Board member and chair of the initiative, captures the idea: "Protecting our water requires a relationship between people, cultures, and the land we share. Water connects us to each other and to those who cared for these lakes before us." Through different programs and events, people are invited to experience the watershed in new ways and consider their own role as caretakers.

HISTORY REVEALED AT THE LAKESHORE

For many, Clean Lakes Alliance's Loop the Lake marks a summer tradition of recreation, celebration, and support. More than 1,000 cyclists circling Lake Monona experience the landscape from a unique perspective through this annual waterfront event. At a docent-led stop at Hudson Park's effigy mounds, riders learned about Indigenous history, the meaning behind the mounds, and Indigenous peoples' enduring relationship with the Yahara lakes.

The stop showed that stewardship reaches beyond water quality to the cultural landscapes that have and continue to leave their mark on this region. Woven into a signature lakeshore event, the experience demonstrated how recreation, education, and cultural awareness can reinforce one another. It also showed how familiar places can reveal richer stories when we pause to learn.

Background photo showing a sandhill crane wading in Lake Wingra

BEGINNING WITH GRATITUDE

At Frederick Springs in Pheasant Branch Conservancy, a Ho-Chunk Water Blessing led by Thomas Redbird IV and family invited attendees to see water not simply as a resource, but as an entity deserving of gratitude, care, and respect. The gathering created space for reflection at a place where groundwater emerges into the watershed and feeds Lake Mendota.

The ceremony encouraged observers to slow down, listen, and consider how water sustains us. That perspective complements Clean Lakes Alliance's work. While monitoring, restoration, and conservation investments remain essential, they grow stronger when individuals cultivate gratitude and a lasting ethic of stewardship.

WINTER TRADITIONS RETURN

Clean Lakes Alliance's Frozen Assets Festival — home to the only 5K Run/Walk occurring entirely on a frozen lake in North America — is best known for introducing people to winter recreation on Lake Mendota. A popular attraction is the Snow Snake Contest, an Indigenous winter sport with a fascinating history. Participants test their skills at sending handcrafted wooden snow snakes along specially prepared tracks, combining friendly competition with a tradition thousands of years old.

For many festivalgoers, the competition is a first encounter with a living Indigenous tradition that continues today. It also embodies the spirit of the Teejop Ecology Initiative by creating space to gather, learn from one another, and honor cultures that have shaped the watershed for millennia.

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

Partnership matters most when it extends beyond individual events and into ongoing decisions. The Ho-Chunk Nation's role on the Renew the Blue Council is, therefore, an important milestone. With Ho-Chunk Nation leadership alongside local governments, nonprofits, and other watershed partners, the Council's work benefits from perspectives grounded in generations of lived experience.

Broader representation strengthens both discussion and solutions. As watershed challenges grow more complex — from heavier rainfall and increased runoff to balancing development with conservation — the best responses will emerge by listening to many voices. We are grateful for the breadth of experience represented on both the Council and the Clean Lakes Alliance Community Board that guides our alliance.

LOOKING AHEAD

Partnership runs throughout these pages for good reason. Some collaborations improve beach testing. Others protect and restore critical landscapes or develop better ways to measure watershed health. The Teejop Ecology Initiative adds another dimension by reminding us that relationships among cultures, histories, and conservation traditions matter just as much as any single project.

Progress moves on many fronts. Scientists explain what is happening and why. Engineers and resource managers design and apply solutions. Volunteers monitor water quality, clean beaches, and restore habitat. Farmers, businesses, organizations, and donors contribute experience, leadership, and funding. Keepers of Indigenous knowledge teach humility, gratitude, and responsibility.

As the Renew the Blue Council continues its work and the Teejop Ecology Initiative grows, so will opportunities for learning, volunteering, celebrating, and building relationships. The goal is not simply cleaner water. It is a community that understands the stories these waters hold, honors the cultures that have cared for them, and accepts a shared responsibility to protect them.

Ho-Chunk Nation drum circle during Clean Lakes Alliance's water blessing ceremony at Frederick Springs at Pheasant Branch Conservancy, April 2026



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A MESSAGE FROM LEADERSHIP

When asked what makes Clean Lakes Alliance special, my answer inevitably comes back to the theme of this Lake-O-Gram. Partnerships are truly the hallmark of an effective alliance. Our Yahara lakes are shaped by millions of decisions across a vast watershed: 28 cities, villages, and towns lie fully or partly within the 385-square-mile basin. No single person, organization, or government can solve the scale of our challenges alone. Progress depends on all of us working toward a shared vision. Together, we can accomplish remarkable things.

That collaborative spirit is what it's going to take to improve beach conditions, conserve land, measure progress, and honor cultural legacies. I hope the stories and updates we shared inspired you, as they did for me. They speak to why this work matters, our shared values, and what collective stewardship can achieve. Whatever role you play, thank you for being part of this alliance and for helping build a healthier future for our lakes and community.

Yours in Partnership,
James Tye, Executive Director



James Tye, Clean Lakes Alliance Executive Director, pictured at center, along with Jason Valerius (Capital Area Regional Planning Commission Executive Director), Melissa Agard (Dane County Executive), Jon Greendeer (Ho-Chunk Nation President), and Aaracgeį Sarah Lemieux-White Eagle (Ho-Chunk Nation District 3 Legislator)

View of lupine at Holy Wisdom Monastery on a hill overlooking Lake Mendota