



# Marquette County Communities Need Wetland Protections

Policy Brief

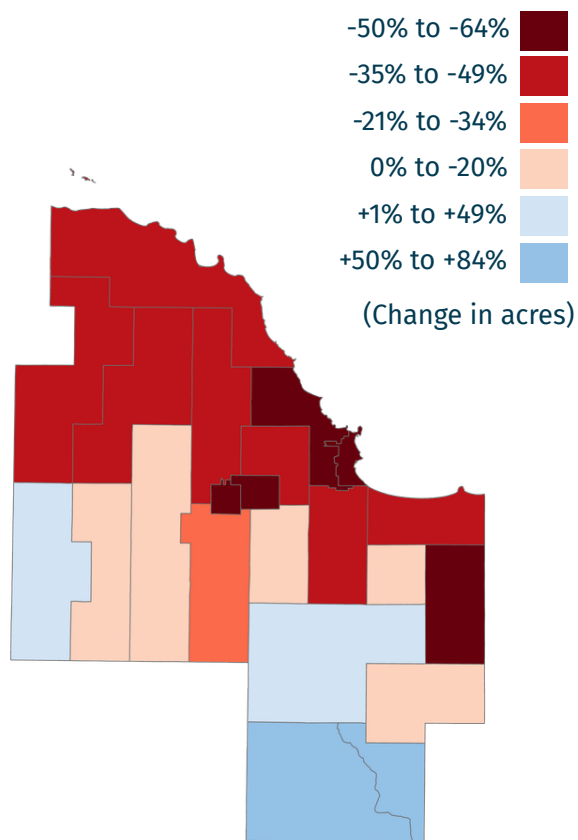
[citizensforsuperior.org](http://citizensforsuperior.org)

## Why protect wetlands?

**Wetlands are essential to the health of the Lake Superior watershed.** Wetlands sift pollutants, excess nutrients, and toxic chemicals from water. Especially along the shorelines of Marquette County's lakes and rivers, wetlands can buffer wave action and reduce erosion. Wetlands are also natural infrastructure that store rain and floodwater. Many fish and wildlife depend on wetlands for food, spawning, and shelter, offering us opportunities for recreation and enjoyment. Responsible land-use controls can protect wetlands, property owners, and Lake Superior.



## Wetland loss in Marquette County



**45,000  
acres lost**

Marquette County has lost 45,000 acres of wetlands, to date.<sup>1</sup> Almost **half of that loss has taken place in Marquette County's coastal communities**, where wetlands play an especially important role as a filtration and erosion buffer on Lake Superior.

Wetlands in Marquette County face threats from efforts to drain and/or fill them for residential, commercial, industrial, and agricultural development. Local wetlands have also been subject to historical logging activity.<sup>2</sup>

## Local governments have an important role

Wetlands are sensitive and ever-changing ecosystems. **Disturbing wetlands for development, road-building, and vegetation or soil removal can cause costly flooding, erosion, and structural issues for property owners and their neighbors.** This is not to mention the potential environmental damage done to water quality, wildlife habitat, and shoreline protection.

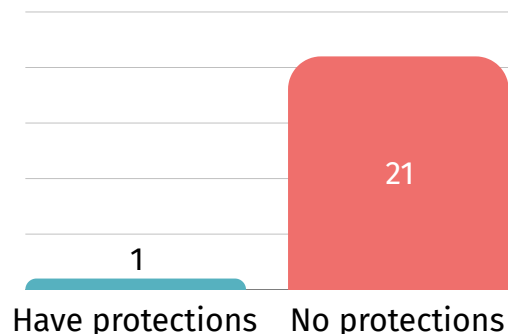
Most of Marquette County's communities enforce a Zoning Ordinance, a document that sets regulations for land-use and zoning. **Local governments can protect wetlands primarily by requiring building setbacks and buffer strips in their Zoning Ordinances.** Setbacks require structures to be built a minimum specified distance away from a wetland's edge. Buffer strips require that a specified area along a wetland's edge remain free from human activity. They can require a barrier of native vegetation, prohibit road construction, and set restrictions on logging, fertilizers, and agricultural activities, among other things. **Wetland setbacks and buffer strips protect the health of wetlands and watersheds, preserve privacy and scenic views, safeguard property owners, and foster proactive community planning.**



## Wetlands left out of existing protections

Out of Marquette County's 22 municipalities, just 1 has a wetland setback and buffer strip in their Zoning Ordinance.<sup>3</sup> Several communities require building setbacks and buffer strips around lakes, rivers, and streams, but the City of Marquette is the only community in Marquette County with measures dedicated for wetlands.<sup>4</sup>

### How many communities in Marquette County have wetland protections?



## Key recommendations

- Marquette County communities should adopt wetland setbacks in their Zoning Ordinances. Building setbacks for inland wetlands should be at least 25 feet, according to the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE).<sup>5</sup>
- Powell Township, Marquette Township, and Chocolay Township, as Lake Superior coastal communities, should consider adopting larger wetland setbacks. Coastal wetlands are especially important for slowing wave action, preventing erosion, and filtering water before it enters Lake Superior.
- Marquette County communities should adopt wetland buffer strips in their Zoning Ordinances. Specifying the portion of a building setback that is closest to the wetland's edge as a buffer strip can provide clarity to property owners (i.e. "X" amount of feet within the setback must remain a buffer strip). But, requiring a buffer strip that is separate from a setback can protect against forestry, agriculture, road-building, and other activities that may not involve a structure being built near wetlands.
- Wetland buffer strips should set restrictions on vegetation removal, soil disturbance, heavy machinery, fertilizers, livestock activities, and road-building.
- Beyond setbacks and buffer strips, Marquette County communities should consider excluding wetlands in minimum lot size requirements, setting restrictions on "funnel" development near wetlands, and utilizing the National Wetland Inventory that is maintained by EGLE in order to identify wetlands near projects early on in the site planning process.
- Marquette County communities should share information with property owners and developers on how to protect wetlands during construction, manage septic systems near wetlands, and steward wetlands for the long-term. Clear guidance can benefit property owners by identifying wetland constraints and reducing the risk of costly flooding, erosion, or project adjustments.

## Sources

**1.** Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; Wetlands Map Viewer. Wetland Status and Trends Tool. **2.** Fizzell, C., Jones, J., Garwood, A., Bostwick, P., Tiner, R., Meersman, M., Macleod, R., & Paige, R. (2015, September). Pre-european settlement to 2005 status and trends of Michigan's wetlands: Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. **3.** Citizens for Superior review of Zoning Ordinances of all 22 Marquette County Municipalities (September, 2026). A municipality was counted as having wetland protections if its zoning ordinance specifically established a setback and buffer requirement for wetlands. **4.** City of Marquette. (August, 2026). Land Development Code. **5.** Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy; Protecting Michigan's Inland Lakes: A Guide for Local Governments

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