

Lake Onalaska Shore land Use Guide

Lake Onalaska was created in 1937 when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers closed the gates on Lock & Dam #7 near Dresbach, creating the lake as a backwater of the Mississippi and Black Rivers. The lake, like other backwaters, is part of the Nine-Foot Navigation Project and is part of the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The privilege to maintain a dock and a boat lift for individual property owners is provided for in the Corps of Engineers Shoreline Management Plan. A strip of federally owned shore land exists between most properties and the lake and is identified by Corps of Engineers boundary signs. Property owners connected to these federal shore lands have distinct privileges and responsibilities.

This shore land pamphlet was developed to help property owners and the general public better understand the multi-agency permit process for shore land uses. Local, state, and federal agencies provide details for areas they regulate, but the information is often too cumbersome for lay person interpretation. Those seeking to do projects or carry out alterations to the shore land areas either on federal or private land need to obtain permits from the appropriate agencies before beginning a project. The list of activities includes: any dredging, dock construction, aquatic weed control, grading, filling, construction, building, or other land base activity on the federal property or within the shore land zone on the owner's private property.

Management Agencies

All Lake Onalaska shore land properties lie in the Town of Onalaska or in the Town of Campbell. The Corps of Engineers owns the shore land and has regulations on this land as well as regulations of wetlands on both public and private property adjacent to navigable waters. The State of Wisconsin administers regulations related to wetlands, navigable waters and grading on the bank of the lake. The County of La Crosse administers a shore land zoning ordinance, which includes all areas within 1000 feet of Lake Onalaska. The ordinance includes a structure setback of 75 feet from the ordinary high water mark (see map). The Town of Onalaska administers general regulations regarding nuisance and land use, as well as a lease for the federal shore land area along Lake Onalaska. The Town of Campbell administers general regulations regarding nuisance and land use on private property. All of the governmental agencies referenced administer permit programs for use of shore land areas except the Town of Campbell.

Permits Needed

Activities that do not require permits are yard maintenance and shoreline cleanup. However, tree cutting and other vegetative modification on federal property requires permission. Activities that involve construction or changing the slope or nature of the land within the shore land zone do require permits from one or more government agencies. In general, the following are good rules of thumb: for a project on land owned by the Corps of Engineers adjacent to your land or between your land and the water, a permit is essential. Shore land rules for the federal land are available from the Town of Onalaska or the Corps Natural Resource office. Town of Onalaska concerns contact the Town of Onalaska. Town of Campbell concerns contact is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers office in La Crescent. Dock permits for the Town of Onalaska are issued by the Town of Onalaska. Dock permits for the Town of Campbell are issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Any activity other than a dock or boat lift usually requires permits from the County of La Crosse or the State of Wisconsin. To install rip rap, other shoreline protection or to dredge, a permit is required from the State of Wisconsin, which is also processed through the Corps of Engineers. A county permit may be needed if significant grading is undertaken.

You may consider the permit requirements burdensome. However, if another individual owned the shore land, you would not do any work on that shore land without permission. The same holds true for the government property. Please check with the agencies responsible for the management of the shore land zone before undertaking any projects. Adequate lead time should be allowed before undertaking a project since some permits are issued only after allowing sufficient time for public comment.

Who to Contact

The following is a list of agencies to contact regarding permits, regulations or use guidelines for Lake Onalaska shore land:

Natural Resource Section
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
1114 South Oak St.
La Crescent, MN 55947 (507)895-6341
Regulatory Office
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
114 South Oak St.
La Crescent, MN 55947 (507)895-8059

Zoning Administrator
La Crosse County Zoning Office
400 North 4th Street
La Crosse, WI 54601 (608)785-9722
Chairman, Town of Onalaska
W7052 Second Street
Onalaska, WI 54650 (608)783-4958

Water Management Specialist

For information regarding the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge, contact
Refuge Manager
555 Lester Ave
Onalaska, WI 54650 (608)783-8405

Wisconsin Dept. of Natural Resources
3550 Mormon Coulee Road
La Crosse, WI 54601 (608) 785-9

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