

# **Iron County Watershed Coalition Annual Report January–December 2025 and Early 2026**

## **Summary**

The Iron County Watershed Coalition (ICWC) continued its mission to ensure the highest possible water quality in Iron County lakes, streams, and wetlands through community engagement, restoration projects, and education. Throughout 2025, ICWC made significant progress in conservation advocacy, infrastructure planning, and community outreach. The organization's work increasingly centered on the protection and future of the Cooks Run property, while maintaining efforts on watershed restoration projects and public education. Early 2026 marked a transition toward broader public engagement strategies, including formal proposals, petitions, and expanded communications efforts surrounding priority conservation issues.

## **Year in Review**

The year 2025 was characterized by strong volunteer participation, development of partnerships, and growing visibility in the community. Major themes included advancing scientific understanding of local watersheds, strengthening relationships with county and state agencies, and building public awareness through events and outreach initiatives. By fall 2025, ICWC had formalized structured collaboration strategies for key initiatives, especially at Cooks Run, signaling a shift toward long-term planning and coordinated advocacy.

## **Cooks Run Conservation Initiative**

Cooks Run emerged as the Coalition's most complex and impactful initiative. Scientific studies confirmed the site's high-quality cold-water stream, sensitive wetlands, and ecological importance. Throughout 2025, ICWC actively engaged with county officials, conservation organizations, and the public to advocate for preservation and responsible stewardship of the property. Key milestones included formation of a multi-organization steering committee, development of conservation goals, and exploration of designations such as Old Growth Forest status. By early 2026, the Coalition advanced strategies including a proposed Environmental Impact Study (EIS), a petition-driven poll, and expanded partnerships with educational institutions. Cooks Run has become a focal point for integrating conservation, recreation, and environmental education within Iron County.

## **Other Major Projects and Programs**

- **Wild River Road Culvert Project:** ICWC pursued grant funding and partnerships to improve aquatic connectivity and fish passage. While initial funding efforts were unsuccessful, progress continues toward securing resources for future implementation.

- Miskwaagamiwiziibi Shelter and Access Improvements: Volunteer-driven work resulted in construction of facilities, trail development, and enhancements to recreational access. These improvements support both community use and watershed stewardship.
- Dober Pit Advocacy: The Coalition continued advocacy for environmental remediation of the Dober Pit site, engaging state officials and supporting efforts to secure funding for cleanup.

### **Community Engagement and Outreach**

ICWC hosted and participated in multiple outreach events, including the 'Float on Fire' paddling event, which brought together more than 30 participants. Educational efforts included student engagement, presentations, and promotion of environmental awareness programs. The organization expanded its communications through website improvements and the development of a social media presence to better inform and engage the public.

### **Scholarship Program**

In 2025, ICWC initiated an annual \$1,000 scholarship to support local students pursuing careers in environmental and natural resource fields. The program is designed to rotate between area school districts and reflects the Coalition's commitment to fostering the next generation of environmental stewards. Last year was West Iron County Schools this year was Forest Park Schools.

### **Partnerships**

ICWC collaborated with numerous organizations, including Trout Unlimited, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Superior Watershed, local schools, and community groups. These partnerships enhanced the Coalition's ability to address complex watershed challenges and expand its impact across the region.

### **Challenges**

The Coalition faced challenges including limited funding for large-scale infrastructure projects, navigating complex land management decisions, and maintaining volunteer capacity. Balancing conservation priorities with competing land-use interests was a recurring theme, particularly in relation to Cooks Run.

### **Looking Ahead: 2026 Priorities**

ICWC will continue to prioritize protection and planning for the Cooks Run site, including development of environmental studies at the site with university partners and expanded public engagement strategies. Additional goals include advancing watershed restoration projects, strengthening partnerships, and enhancing organizational capacity. The Coalition remains committed to protecting Iron County's water resources for future generations through science-based approaches and community collaboration.