

7/9/08 Ontonagon Herald

## Ontonagon River Watershed Council to be established

*Submitted by Michael Genrich*

Our familiar and muddy old Ontonagon River is the most singularly unique and historic watercourse in the entire Upper Peninsula, bar none. The size of its attendant watershed is huge - as the largest single watershed on the south side of Lake Superior, it touches everyone who lives in this Ontonagon country in some way, draining as it does a land area of 1,362 square miles. In addition and despite its generally turbid appearance, most of the Ontonagon River watershed's water quality, in its many branches and throughout its long length, is considered by most water experts today to be practically pristine, a rarity not only in the upper Midwest but sadly, also in the United States as a whole.

The Ontonagon River watershed covers portions of five northern counties: Ontonagon, Gogebic, Houghton, Iron and Vilas (Wisconsin). The combined length of the Ontonagon River main stem and its tributaries is 1,291 miles, of which 169 river miles (over thirteen percent) and some 42,000 acres of adjacent river corridor are designated as 'special' under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. There are 200 lakes larger than ten acres within the Ontonagon River watershed, and one of them, Lake Gogebic, with a surface area of 13,048 acres, is the largest lake in the Upper Peninsula.

Despite the vastness of the Ontonagon River watershed and its

enormous impact on the western Upper Peninsula in general, there is currently no single local stakeholder organization that is concerned with the health of the watershed overall, a fact that has recently been brought home dramatically by the (literally) dozens of formal intervenor submissions to FERC regarding UPPCO's hydroelectric license amendment application for its Bond Falls real estate development plans, from a myriad of different stakeholders. But once the current Bond Falls situation has been decided, one way or the other, by FERC, many of those currently interested parties will undoubtedly fall by the wayside.

To correct this situation and to provide a local citizen 'watchdog' organization for the long-term protection of the watershed long after the present Bond Falls development controversy has been resolved, the Ontonagon River Watershed Council is currently being formed in affiliation with the Superior Watershed Partnership, a nationally recognized 501(c)(3) non-profit organization which is headquartered in Marquette. The Partnership currently has almost two dozen watershed councils established across the U.P. Its website is [www.superiorwatersheds.org](http://www.superiorwatersheds.org).

Interested readers are invited to contact Michael Genrich in Ontonagon at 906-884-6103 for further information. An initial organizational meeting will be scheduled later, depending on reader response.