



Iowa Department of Natural Resources  
**Water Trails Program**  
**Water Trail Planning Assistance**  
**Selection Application**



**INTRODUCTION**

**(PLEASE DELETE THIS SECTION FROM YOUR APPLICATION)**

Navigable waterways are held in the public trust by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (Iowa DNR). Iowa Code section 464A.11 directs the Department to establish and maintain plans for the water trails program, and subsequent appropriations provide resources to conduct program activities. Local planning is important for water trail development, as navigable waters are used by many Iowans for various activities (boating, fishing, innertubing, paddling, wildlife viewing, etc.) while often flowing between private lands. Rivers and large lakes are often a defining community attraction, but sometimes misuse or poor planning results in safety, inappropriate infrastructure, or law enforcement problems. Iowa DNR partners with local communities and directs resources to community planning, engineered site designs, interpretive products, etc. This application form provides a means for local partners to apply for planning assistance and understand how selections will be made.

**Prequalification Application Instructions**

To qualify for water trail selection, the following items must be completed and emailed to the water trails coordinator, [John.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:John.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov) by **midnight, September 5, 2025**:

1. Cover Page, with full contact information (**Section A**) should be the first page of the application, include any matching funds. You can also wait until the final application to list funding partners or matching funds.
2. Proposed Water Trail Extent Map: Please provide a map (**Section B**) showing the project area - where water trail will begin and end.
3. County Support: Letters of support or a resolution in support of the proposed water trail project (**Section C**) from both the county board of supervisors and the county conservation board within the project area.
4. Sponsorship and Land Manager Commitment: A water trail sponsor must be identified in **Section D** below. This must be a governmental entity. Typically, the sponsor is the county conservation board, but it can be any governmental entity. This section requires sponsor and land managers to sign-off on the project, acknowledging that they will manage and maintain public lands, accesses, water trail signage, or other infrastructure along the water trail to a certain standard, as identified in that section. If DNR Wildlife or State Parks manages land along the proposed water trail route, please email [john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov) in advance of submitting the prequalification application. The water trails coordinator will take care of affirming commitment with their colleagues. Please do not ask them to sign Section D.

Upon receipt of the pre-qualification applications, **landowner mail-in surveys** will be completed by DNR (at DNR expense) and the results and analyses will be emailed to the applicants to be reviewed and shared with key partners/land managers. The survey is sent only to landowners who own land adjacent to the prospective water trails.

Applicants who fail to submit the prequalification application (**Sections A, B, C, and D**), by midnight, September 5, 2025, will be ineligible.

**Final Application Instructions:**

You will be informed by the state water trails coordinator if you qualified to move on to the final application process. After qualification, please complete **Sections E and F** of the application and email to [john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov) by **December 5, 2025**.

**Other important information:**

1. The intent of this application is to offer planning services for new prospective state water trails, existing state designated water trails without plans.
2. The planning process offers opportunities for community input from landowners and user groups to local managers and law enforcement--community input is highly valued.

3. The DNR may deem it necessary to disengage from the project at any time if local support for the project is lacking.
4. Water trail planning may take 18 to 24 months to complete, but water trail designation (if not already designated) comes soon after the plan is approved and key items are completed including signed management agreements, signage installation, and printed brochures. Projects identified in the plan do not need to be complete before designation; in fact, it's rare that any projects will be completed prior to designation.
5. While engineered access/parking designs are outcomes of the plan, it can take two years or more before projects get built due to funding constraints, permitting, weather, and/or project complexity. If the primary goal is simply to improve or build an access, see the Department's [Water Recreation Access Cost-Share Program](#).
6. Once a project is selected, the DNR will begin to work on assembling the background information, contracting with experts in their fields to develop reports necessary to complete the existing conditions section of the water trail plan. DNR's commitment to the selected applicant:
  - Develop the water trail plan
  - Develop signage plan
  - Contract for preliminary site designs with cost estimates for new or improved projects
  - Provide supplementary reports to satisfy existing conditions section of water trail plan
  - Purchase initial and all replacement water trail signs for the life of the water trail
  - Develop an interpretive brochure with map of project area for Web and print layouts
  - Assist with water trail dedication
  - Offer annual project grant opportunities (dependent on funding)
  - Provide ongoing support and technical assistance as needed.

## Timeline

1. Prequalification application must be received by midnight, September 5, 2025.
2. DNR conducts landowner mail-in surveys and submits results to applicants.
3. Final water trail planning application deadline is December 5, 2025. Any announcements related to this application will appear on the [Paddling & River Recreation](#) page of our website.
4. Applications will be scored within 45 days from application deadline.
5. You will be notified within 10 days after the applications have been scored.
6. It may take up to six months before the planning process begins in earnest because a number of reports are needed to provide information for existing conditions section of the plan: archaeological, geological, and informal biological assessments.
7. Water Trail Planning begins in earnest after June 30, 2026.

## How will applications be reviewed?

Applications will be scored by three Iowa DNR staff members and two appointed citizen water trail advocates. After scoring, and carefully considering the merits of each application, the committee will decide which project is selected for planning assistance.

## Application instructions

Any announcements related to the grant can be found on the [Paddling & River Recreation](#) page of our website. Please review the application checklists below. Email your prequalification and final applications to [john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov) by dates noted above.

If you have questions regarding this application or state water trails development, please contact:

John Wenck  
Iowa DNR, River Programs at  
515-494-8629 or  
[john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov](mailto:john.wenck@dnr.iowa.gov)

## Applicant eligibility

Local divisions of Iowa government are eligible applicants/prospective water trail sponsors. The Iowa DNR does not make or imply any guarantees from the information found in this application.

**Project Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Prequalification checklist (Due by midnight, September 1, 2025):**

- ☐ A. COVER PAGE with full contact information should be the first page of all applications.
- ☐ B. MAPS. Please provide a detailed map showing the project area with water trail start and stop points, public lands, accesses, amenities, other nearby trails, nearby cities/towns, etc. within approximately 20 miles of the project.
- ☐ C. COUNTY SUPPORT (letters or minutes from county conservation board & county board of supervisors acknowledging support for your proposed water trail project.)
- ☐ D. PROJECT COMMITMENT PAGE

**Final Application checklist (Due by midnight, December 5, 2025)**

- ☐ E. NARRATIVE assessing existing conditions. Describe how water trails planning/development might solve problems or lead to safer and/or improved user experiences (please include photos showing existing conditions). Identify the local support and enthusiasm for the proposed water trail project. Narrative should be no more than two typed pages.
- ☐ F. APPLICATION RANKING CRITERIA. This section contains your responses to application ranking criteria questions. Please keep the question and number of points eligible for each question in this section.

**Note: when you submit your final application, please include all sections from the prequalification application with the final application together. The final application should include all sections: A, B, C, D, E, and F. This will benefit the scoring committee who will be making the water trail selection.**

**A. Water Trail Planning/Project Selection Application - Cover Page**

**Deadline: September 5, 2025**

Project Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Applicant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Person: \_\_\_\_\_

Address (street address required): \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (day): \_\_\_\_\_ Phone (evening): \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Is this water trail project already state designated? \_\_\_\_\_

\*Identify any funding partners/grants and amounts secured for this project:

Funding Partner: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Funding Partner: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Funding Partner: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

\*This part could be completed after the prequalification phase.

**B. Project Location Maps**

Please provide a detailed map showing the project area with water trail start and stop points.

**C. County Support**

A letter supporting the prospective project from the board chair or president, or a resolution in support of the prospective water trail from: A) the county conservation board; and B) the county board of supervisors (attach this page in front of the letters or resolutions) in the prequalification application.

## D. Project Commitment Section

State designated water trails require a water trail sponsor and agreements for all land managers for maintenance and management of access areas and signage. This page shall be completed by each land manager with responsibilities along the water trail, with the exception of DNR Wildlife and State Parks. A *Memorandum of Agreement* shall be signed toward the end of the planning process that identifies responsibilities in more detail before the DNR purchases signage and designates the water trail.

### Minimum Responsibilities

#### Water Trail Sponsor:

1. Acts as the public's direct point of contact for the water trail, and responds to concerns and questions that arise in a timely manner.
2. Alerts DNR water trails coordinator about major river-wide obstructions in the channel, hazardous situations along the water trail, or any other serious problems that arise within 24 hours of known occurrence.
3. Communicates and collaborates with all water trail land managers, and key stakeholder groups to solve problems that arise.
4. Ensures that law enforcement is briefed in dealing with problem users.
5. Reviews and provides timely feedback when asked to review draft to water trail plans, signage plans, engineer designs, and interpretive materials (brochures, maps, and panels).
6. Inspects water trail signs annually to check for missing or damaged signs and alerts DNR when new signs are needed.
7. Ensures brush, tree branches, or other obstructions do not impede visibility of water trail signs.
8. Participates and encourages participation of others in the following programs and campaigns: litter control, river etiquette, river safety education and enforcement.
9. Meets with water trail partners/land managers annually to discuss plan implementation, and identifies any issues that need addressed or changes that should be made. Identifies what is or isn't working, potential solutions, and how Iowa DNR can help. Submits meeting summary/progress report to the Iowa DNR water trails coordinator.

#### Public Land Managers:

1. Remove sediment from canoe/kayak launches or motorized boat ramps within one week of high-water events at heavily used accesses, and within two weeks at other accesses.
2. Mow and remove trash weekly at heavily used public areas, and twice per month at other public areas.
3. Maintain restrooms weekly at heavily used accesses, and twice per month at other accesses.
4. Install initial and replacement water trail signs as needed.

We have read the minimum responsibilities above and, if this project is selected for water trail planning and development, I agree to maintain water trail access areas and signage as specified above.

**Prospective Water Trail Sponsor (organization):** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Land Manager (organization):** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Land Manager (organization):** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Land Manager (organization):** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Land Manager (organization):** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Land Manager (organization):** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Land Manager (organization):** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*(Duplicate land manager section as needed)*



**E. Narrative**

Assess the existing conditions. Describe how water trails planning/development might solve existing problems or lead to safer and/or improved user experiences (Please include photos of existing conditions). Identify the local support and enthusiasm that has led to this proposed project. Section E should be no more than two typed pages, but include as many photos as necessary.

## F. Application Ranking Criteria

Applications will be reviewed on a 100-point scoring system. Point values have been assigned to the various questions in the application as indicated below. Beyond the points system below, the scoring committee will take into account overall benefit to the state's water trails system, qualifications of applicant, soundness of project, and perceived likelihood of success described in the narrative. Please be concise; limit responses to a maximum of 250 words per question.

1. Is the waterbody identified in "Section C" a state designated water trail without a plan? If not, has the project received Iowa DNR funding in the past, or completed initial Iowa DNR planning? (check 1, 2, or 3)  
☐ 1. Yes, all or most of the waterbody is a state designated water trail without a plan. (10 points)  
☐ 2. No, the waterbody is not state designated but has received some Iowa DNR funding or initial planning. (5 points)  
☐ 3. No, the waterbody is not state designated and has not received Iowa DNR funding or initial planning. (0 points)
2. How would this project benefit local communities - economically, environmentally, quality of life, and otherwise? (10 points)
3. What is the distance (in miles) between your proposed project and the nearest state designated water trail? To view the active state designated water trails, use the [Interactive Paddling Map](#) (10 points. Scoring guidance: project area farthest away from a state designated water trail receives 100% of possible points)
4. What is the approximate width of the waterbody and total length (in miles) of the proposed water trail? Identify how these variables might affect/impact users, adjacent landowners, and the resource itself if the waterbody becomes a state water trail. What could be done to offset any negative impacts? (10 points)
5. Describe the water resource and how the proposed water trail will be attractive to people seeking recreational experiences on it. (5 points)
6. Describe how your water trail project can benefit multiple user groups: paddlers, anglers, people with limited mobility, motor-boaters, snowmobilers, wildlife viewers, etc. (10 points)

7. What funds, if any, can local project partners commit to water trail planning and development? (10 points. Scoring guidance: highest amount receives 100% of total possible points; however, diversity of project partners providing funding is a priority, as well)
8. Considering the results of the mail-in survey from adjacent landowners, describe ways in which you might be able to achieve buy-in, or mitigate any issues or concerns that were raised in the landowner survey. (10 points)
9. How might this water trail project correspond with conservation efforts, including but not limited to watershed improvements, trash clean-ups, river restoration, scenic view protection, water quality monitoring, or other conservation efforts? (10 points)
10. How does this project fit in the overall statewide water trail system? Does it connect to other types of existing trails (i.e. biking, hiking, pedestrian)? Describe benefits of linkages to other types of trails or existing water trails. What does your proposed project offer that's different or unique from other state water trails, especially those nearby? (10 points)