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Burke Center Leads Fight Against Invasive Plant on Turtle-Flambeau Flowage

Ashland, Wis., January 16, 2025 – Northland College’s Mary Griggs Burke Center for Freshwater Innovation is playing a critical role in preserving the ecological health of the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage in Mercer, Wisconsin. This beloved waterway, spanning 12,942 acres of water and surrounded by 37,000 acres of state-owned land, is cherished for its breathtaking beauty, remote campsites, and abundant recreational opportunities. However, its future is under threat due to the recent discovery of the invasive Eurasian watermilfoil.

Eurasian watermilfoil, first detected in the flowage in August 2023, can cause significant ecological and recreational challenges. This invasive plant can form dense mats that limit light penetration, crowd out native aquatic plants, degrade fish habitats, and hinder water-based recreation.

At the request of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Iron County Land and Water Conservation Department, the Burke Center collaborated with the North Lakeland Discovery Center to conduct aquatic plant surveys in the summer of 2024. Two teams of Burke Center student researchers, guided by expert staff, focused their efforts on the northeastern and eastern arms of the flowage and areas where the watermilfoil was previously detected or suspected.

Using specialized long rakes to collect plant samples, the teams identified and documented the presence of Eurasian watermilfoil and surveyed the diversity of aquatic plants in the area. The findings offer a glimmer of hope: the invasive watermilfoil remains localized to a small section of the flowage, and the overall aquatic plant diversity remains high.

“While the presence of Eurasian watermilfoil is concerning, the data we collected will be invaluable for guiding future management strategies,” said Cayla Cavey, assistant operations and lab manager at the Burke Center. “We’re committed to supporting efforts to protect the flowage’s unique ecosystem and ensuring its long-term health.”

This effort exemplifies the Burke Center’s dedication to hands-on research and community collaboration to address pressing environmental challenges. Led by former Associate

Director—Inland Lakes Peter Levi and Assistant Operations and Lab Manager Cayla Cavey, the project team included Northland College student researchers Mike Boland, Gabby Buckholt, Shelby Justman, Tennessee Swearingen, and Clara Schmiesing. Their work not only informs invasive species management but also provides students with invaluable field experience in freshwater research.

The results of the summer surveys will aid the DNR and other local conservation organizations in developing targeted strategies to control the spread of Eurasian watermilfoil and protect the Turtle-Flambeau Flowage for future generations.

The Northland College Mary Griggs Burke Center for Freshwater Innovation focuses on scientific research, communication, and thought leadership on water issues in the Great Lakes region and beyond. Aiming to increase water literacy, the center houses a robust student research program and conducts research studies and public outreach. The Burke Center also offers a professional lab and many other services for external partners.

Northland College is a private environmental liberal arts college located just blocks away from Lake Superior in Ashland, Wisconsin. Founded in 1892, the College adopted a bold new mission and made history in 1974 as the first college in the country to fully integrate an environmental focus with its liberal arts curriculum. Today, Northland College is a powerful and intimate learning community of about three hundred students from across the United States and beyond.

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