The Otter Tail River is the most biologically diverse river in the Red River Basin. Improving habitat and water quality of the Lower Otter Tail River (LOTR) would have numerous ecological and recreational benefits.

The Lower Otter Tail River, in addition to several other tributaries of the Red River, were channelized in the 1950s by the Army Corps of Engineers to reduce the footprint of the river for agriculture and to increase the speed of runoff. The rivers were straightened, which greatly reduced the length of the river and steepened the slope and increased flows in the river. This channelization has reduced habitat diversity and quality and contributed to impaired water quality.

**Vision Statement**

**Lower Otter Tail River**

**Current condition - unstable & unhealthy**

- Channelized or straightened stretches that have steeper slopes and faster flows
- Poor quality riparian buffers (annual crops, overgrazed, very thin)
- High and/or poorly vegetated stream banks which makes them vulnerable to erosion and unstable
- Bank and bed erosion in areas
- Sections of the river full of fine sediment (silts and sands)
- Poor quality, homogenous aquatic habitat
- The LOTR is declared impaired for turbidity, caused by suspended sediment, by the MPCA. High turbidity degrades water quality and is harmful to aquatic life.

**Potential condition - stable & healthy**

- A meandering river with proper slopes, channel length, and speed of flow
- Vegetated riparian buffers and floodplain that would greatly reduce bed and bank erosion and improve water quality
- Quality, diverse aquatic habitat – deep swift pools, rocky riffles, overhanging and rooted bank vegetation
- Quality riparian habitat to provide a buffer along the banks and a wildlife corridor
- Improved water quality through cleaner, clearer water
- A connected floodplain that helps to store and dissipate flood flows and provide wildlife habitat
The Otter Tail River is home to the most diverse fish assemblage (75 species) in the Red River Basin.

Game fish that would thrive in a habitat rich river include channel catfish, walleye, sauger, lake sturgeon, muskellunge, northern pike, smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, rock bass and white bass. Less targeted species include freshwater drum, redhorse species, and bowfin. White bass, sauger, and lake sturgeon and other non-game were blocked from the LOTR till the dam on Breckenridge Lake was removed. Now the LOTR is free flowing from the Red River upstream to Orwell Dam.

The Otter Tail River is a state water trail that provides 157 river miles of river recreation. Restoration of the LOTR would greatly benefit water recreational opportunities and experiences – fishing, wildlife viewing, paddling, and nature viewing.