The Central Region

Overview

Located in the heart of the State, the Central Region borders each of the other four regions and Wisconsin. It is positioned between the expanding Twin Cities Metropolitan Area on its southeastern edge, the Glacial Lakes area to the southwest and northwest, and the Central Lakes to the north. The Mississippi River runs through its center, and Saint Cloud is its dominant commercial center. West of the Mississippi River a moraine of rolling hills, hardwood forest, and lakes formed by glaciers characterizes the landscape. East of the Mississippi the land is flat sand plain, peat land, and/or hardwood forest.

// The Mississippi River is central to both the topography and growth of the Central Region.
// The Central Region is expected to see the fastest growth of any area in the state in the next 25 years.
// The Region’s outdoor resources include a number of lakes and rivers, including the bottom half of Lake Mille Lacs and the Mississippi, Rum, and St. Croix Rivers.
// The Region’s land cover is mostly pasture, grassland and crop lands.
The Central Region

The Mississippi River and the rivers that flow to it are central to the Region. Receding glaciers formed the rolling moraine landscape of hills and glacial lakes west and south of the River. The Region’s flat central portion is a vestige of deposits from the large Glacial Lake Duluth.

Topography

Lakes, Rivers, & Water Trails

The Region has many lakes, rivers, and wetlands. Even though the southern half of Mille Lacs Lake, one of Minnesota’s largest and most popular fishing lakes, is in the Region, most of its many lakes are much smaller. Many are concentrated south and west of Saint Cloud. The Mississippi River flows from the north to arc to the southeast through its center. The Rum River starts at Lake Mille Lacs and winds its way circuitously through Milaca, Princeton, and Cambridge before going south and leaving the Region. The Saint Croix forms the Minnesota-Wisconsin border on its eastern edge. In the west the Sauk River flows through Sauk Center, winds through Cold Spring, Rockville, and Waite Park before joining the Mississippi at Sauk Rapids. The North Fork of the Crow River starts in Lake Koronis in Stearns County and winds west to east across Wright County before joining the South Fork at Rockford and flowing northeast to the Mississippi.
Ecological Subsections

Of Minnesota’s 26 ecological subsections, the Central Region has six. They range from prairie and peatlands to morainal and sand plains. The Land Study (DNR 2000) identifies the Hardwood Hills and the Anoka Sand Plain Subsections as subsections with the most biological themes that are underrepresented in state parks and recreation areas.

Land Cover

Although there are areas of forest in the north and around the lakes, and large areas of shrubs in and woody wetlands in areas through the rest of the Region, the Region’s predominant land cover is pasture, grassland, and croplands. Development is concentrated in the Saint Cloud Area and in smaller communities along the Mississippi and in the Region’s eastern half.
The Central Region

Communities & Transportation System

The Region’s communities are associated with the Mississippi River and the crescent of exurban growth that surrounds the seven-county Twin Cities Metropolitan Area. Saint Cloud and its surrounding cities dominate the Region’s center. The Saint Cloud-Big Lake-Monticello-Elk River-Anoka-Minneapolis Corridor is part of the Saint Cloud to Chicago growth corridor. Passenger rail service is operating from Minneapolis to Big Lake, and there are future plans to extend the service to Saint Cloud. Because of its central position, many of the highways from the Twin Cities run through the Region to other parts of the State. Interstate Highway 94 and Federal Highway 10 run northwest. State Highways 169 and 65 and Interstate 35 go north. Two scenic byways follow the Region’s major rivers; a third meanders through the Glacial Lakes Area.

Historic Resources

There are a number of historic places associated with parks and trails in the Region. The Mille Lacs Kathio Historic District, a National Historic Landmark, is a pre-contact village site with a 9,000 years plus history. The portion of the Crow Wing State Park that is in the Region is an important historic American Indian site and an early settlers’ trading and logging village. Interstate State Park has Works Progress Administration (WPA) structures and is the site of the world’s largest log jam. Charles A. Lindbergh State Park has the Lindbergh house and WPA structures.
Population Distribution

The population is clustered in the Saint Cloud Area and in communities just north of the Metropolitan Area. Population is thinnest in Morrison, Kanabec, and Mille Lacs Counties.

Population Shift

Between 2005 and 2035, Wright (115.6%), Sherburne (111.8%), Isanti (94.8%), and Chisago (92.1%), the counties closest to the Metro Region, are to predicted to experience the greatest population growth. The Region’s predicted growth average is 74.4%, substantially higher than the statewide average of 24.2% growth. It is projected the Region will account for 15% of the States’ population in 2035, up from 10% in 2005.
The Metro Region

Overview

The seven-county Metropolitan Region borders the Central and the South Regions and Wisconsin and is the economic, cultural, educational, political, transportation, and commercial center of the State. The Region’s cities, rivers and valleys, many lakes and wetlands are its dominant landscape features. Many city and county governments develop, own, and operate local parks and trails in the Region. In coordination with the 10 implementing agencies, the Metropolitan Council’s Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission develops a long-range plan and an acquisition and development program that identifies funding priorities for regional parks and park reserves.

// More than half of the state’s population lives in the Metro Region, which has a population density eight times that of the state.
// The Region includes the Mississippi, Minnesota, Rum, Cannon, and St. Croix rivers.
// Most of the Region is greatly altered morainal landscape.
// Half of the land in the Region is developed or developing.
The Region's rivers slice through the morainal landscape. The Mississippi River cut a deep gorge as over time its falls moved upstream to its present location at Saint Anthony Falls in Minneapolis. The glacial melt waters of the mighty Glacial River Warren cut a wide valley through which the relatively diminutive Minnesota River now flows. Glacial melt waters also formed the Saint Croix Valley on the Region's eastern edge. The flat Anoka Sand Plain spreads across the Region in the north.

Like many areas in Minnesota, the Region's many lakes and rivers are vestiges of its glacial history. A series of glaciers created depressions that became lakebeds and torrents of glacial melt waters sculpted riverbeds. Although most counties have many lakes and wetlands, Dakota County has few. Many lakes are located in the Region's parks of regional significance. The Region is located at the confluence of three of the State's largest and most important rivers: The Mississippi, the Minnesota, and the Saint Croix. Its state water trails include North Fork, Rum, Minnesota, Mississippi, Cannon, and Saint Croix. The Region's three state parks and many of its parks of regional significance are located along these water trails.
Ecological Subsections

The entire Region is located in only one highly altered ecological section, the Minnesota and Northeast Iowa Morainal. Although the ecological section representation is low, five ecological subsections are represented within it. The Land Study (DNR 2000) identifies the Hardwood Hills and the Anoka Sand Plain Subsections as subsections with the most biological themes that need to be represented in state parks and recreation areas.

Land Cover

About half of the Metro’s 3,000 square miles is developed or developing. This highly altered landscape is concentrated in the region’s center. Development thins as it spreads out towards the region’s edges in all four directions. Pockets of park and reserves are found throughout the Region, but most of the largest parcels and most park and park reserve acreages are located beyond the first-ring suburbs.
The Metro Region

Communities & Transportation System

Half of the State's population lives within the Region. Located at the Region's center, Minneapolis and Saint Paul are its most densely populated areas. Suburban communities radiate out from this urban core while growing exurban communities are located on the Region's edges. The post World War II growth that the Region has experienced is expected to continue, and the Region's population is projected to grow by 1 million in the next two decades. The Region is bifurcated north and south by I-94/I-394, east and west by I-35, and encircled by I-494/I-694. Major national railroads pass through the center. The Twin Cities have been identified as a destination for future high-speed passenger rail service from Chicago. The Minnesota Comprehensive Statewide Freight and Passenger Rail Plan identifies future increased passenger rail service as originating in the Region and radiating out to communities in Greater Minnesota. The Region has one light rail transit line, another is under construction, and several more are being planned. The region has four scenic byways. The Saint Croix, Great River Road, and Minnesota River Valley all connect the Region to regions beyond the Metro area. The Grand Rounds encircles Minneapolis Chain of Lakes Regional Park.

Historic Resources

The Region's many historic sources include Fort Snelling, an area sacred to American Indians and important in the State's European settlement history, and many other sites within the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area.
Population Distribution
The Metro Region has over eight times the density of the State. The population is the densest at the center and thins towards the Region’s edges. Ramsey, Hennepin, and Anoka Counties are the densest counties.

Population Shift
Between 2005 and 2035, Scott (146.7%), Carver (86.6.1%), and Washington (38.2%) counties on the Region’s edges are predicted to grow the fastest. The Metro Region’s predicted growth of 20.6% is below the State’s predicted growth of 24.2%. In 2005 the Region had 53.6% of the State’s population. In 2035 it is predicted to have 52.0% of the population.
The Northeast Region

Overview

An area of boreal forests, Northeastern Minnesota is not only home to Minnesotans who value the outdoors and outdoor activities; it is also a popular place for second homes and outdoor oriented vacations. Home to many indigenous people prior to European settlement, tribal lands are owned today by the Grand Portage, Bois Forte/Nett Lake, and Fond de Lac Bands of Ojibwe. Although historically dominated by the extraction of fur, lumber, and iron ore, its economy is increasingly dependent on outdoor recreation-based tourism. The Northeast is one of Minnesota's prime areas for tourism. It has iconic landscapes and large amounts of federal, state, and tribal lands.

Amenity-rich aquatic and terrestrial recreational environments characterize the Region. The landforms, vegetation patterns, and water features of the Region's iconic landscapes inform the location and types of its parks and trails. The North Shore of Lake Superior, one of Minnesota's best loved and most widely known iconic landscapes, is valued for its majestic beauty and recreation assets. Although many resorts and private second homes line its shores, state and local parks, waysides, historic sites, a national monument, and a variety of trails strung along the shore provide public access to the lake. Along the Region's northern border, the lakes and rivers of Voyageurs National Park and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness offer wilderness experiences. The Mississippi Headwaters Area, with its many lakes, provides swimming, boating, and some of the best fishing in Minnesota. The many acres of state and federally managed forests, with their trails and campsites, provide both timber and outdoor recreational experiences. Current and planned terrestrial trails provide hiking, cross country skiing, snowmobiling, and cycling experiences. Ten scenic byways wind through beautiful landscapes of northern forests, lakes, ridges, and wetlands. The Iron Range Off Highway Vehicle Park at Gilbert and numerous trails provide motorized recreational opportunities.

// The Northeast Region is exceptionally rich in natural areas and water resources.
// All or part of half the state's ecological subsections are in the Region.
// The predominant land cover is wet and dry forests and vegetation.
The Northeast Region

Topography

The Region’s topography varies widely, the result of the interplay of glacial, hydrologic, and geologic activity. The historic center of the Region’s mining industry, the Laurentian Divide, rises to form the Region’s backbone running southwest to northeast for almost 180 miles. A series of stream-cut ravines characterize the rocky shore of the Lake Superior. Scoured by glaciers that also formed a series of drumlins, uplands rise from the coast of the Lake. Glacial scouring also created the exposed ridges and outcroppings found in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. West and south of the Divide the flat areas are glacial lake bottoms. Glaciers deposited the rolling moraines in the Region’s southern portion. South of Lake Superior, rivers and streams cut the glacial deposits to reveal rocks and make steep ravines.

Lakes, Rivers and Water Trails

Water is an important Northeastern Minnesota landscape feature. Its many rivers and streams are part of three of North America’s most prominent watersheds. The Saint Croix is a tributary of the Mississippi, the largest river system on the continent. The Mississippi River makes a large easterly arc before heading south to Gulf of Mexico. The waters from the Saint Louis, Cloquet, Pigeon Rivers, Nemadji, and rivers and streams along the North Shore flow east to the Saint Lawrence River and the Atlantic Ocean. The Rainy, the Big Fork, and the Little Fork Rivers flow north and west to Hudson Bay. Eleven rivers are designated state water trails. Some of the best fishing in Minnesota is found on the Region’s many lakes. Although there are lakes throughout the Region, many are concentrated north of the Laurentian Divide, along the border, in the Mississippi headwaters area, and on both sides of the Mississippi northwest of Lake Mille Lacs. Some lakes were created by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers’ impoundments of the Mississippi and its tributaries, and others were created by iron ore mining.
Ecological Subsections

Of Minnesota's 26 ecological subsections, the Northeastern Region has all or parts of half of them, reflecting the Region's complexity. Three of the ecological subsections, the Toimi Uplands, the Little Fork-Vermillion Uplands and the Laurentian Uplands, have been identified as underrepresented in state parks and recreation areas in the 2000 Land Study.

Land Cover

Wet and dry forests and vegetation cover much of the region. These vary from areas of sugar maple, basswood, and paper birch upland forests, and wetlands of tamarack forests, sedge meadows, and fens in the west; fire-dependent woodlands of pine, oak, and aspen by the Saint Croix; sugar maple, white pine, yellow birch, and paper birch in the highlands along Lake Superior; and white cedar, alder, and willow along the Mississippi. In part, because of the logging practices used in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the formerly red and white pine dominant forest in the Superior Uplands is now dominated by aspen and birch. Along the Laurentian Ridge there are large mining pits, piles of mining debris covered with vegetation, and pit lakes.
Northeastern Minnesota communities are concentrated in four areas. Duluth / Cloquet area communities have the largest population concentration. Founded as part of the mining industry, the Mesabi Iron Range cities stretch in a line along the Laurentian Divide from Grand Rapids to Ely. A second line of communities stretches from Two Harbors to Grand Marais along the North Shore. The Brainerd / Baxter Central Lakes Area in the Region's southwest corner is a popular tourist destination and has many resorts, second homes, and retirement homes.

The Region's transportation system reflects historic development patterns, community locations, interregional and national connections, and the needs of the Region's mining, logging, and tourism industries. Brainerd / Baxter is reached by MN-371 via US-10. I-35 connects Duluth/Cloquet Area to the Twin Cities. State and federal highways connect the Iron Range Cities to each other and to Duluth / Cloquet. North Shore communities are connected to each other, Duluth, and Canada by a state highway. Although most federal and state roads radiate out from the Duluth / Cloquet area, not all do. MN-1 connects the North Shore with Ely; MN-201 connects Crosby to Carleton. The Region has many scenic byways that wind along and through its beautiful landscapes of forest, rivers, and lakes.

Although active rail lines connect Duluth to the Twin Cities, Grand Rapids, and beyond, most of the Region's railroads have regional destinations that serve the mining industry. Active lines connect the Iron Range with Two Harbors, Silver Bay, and Duluth. Trains, including a tourist train, also run from Duluth to Two Harbors. The region has many abandoned rail corridors because rail service has been consolidated as needs for service declined with the shrinking of the mining industry. The abandoned corridors that emanate from Brainerd and its Northern Pacific Railroad Shops Historic District reflect the City's status as an historic rail center.

The Region's history is reflected in its many sites on the National Register of Historic Places in Minnesota. The Soudan Underground Mine and St. Croix Recreational Demonstration Area and National Historic Landmarks and Grand Portage is a National Monument. Many historic sites are in state parks or along trails. Of the 22 state parks with historically recognized Works Progress Administration / Civilian Conservation Corps structures, five are in the Region. Crow Wing State Park has an American Indian site, an early settlers’ community important for fur trading and logging, and a segment of the Red River Oxcart Trail. Gooseberry Falls State Park is a Native American site and has many WPA structures. Hill Annex Mine State Park is an historic mine site. Jay Cooke State Park has a WPA / CCC Historic District and the Grand Portage of the Saint Louis River. Saint Croix has WPA structures. Savanna Portage State Park was a key site of the transportation route between the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes used by Indians, fur traders, missionaries, and travelers. Tettegouche State Park has an historic businessmen's camp. The Minnesota Historical Society operates Split Rock Lighthouse. Judge C.R. Magney State Park was a WPA campsite.
Population Distribution

The Region’s population is concentrated in the Greater Duluth Area, in the Brainerd / Baxter Area, and on the Iron Range in a line along the Laurentian Divide. Smaller communities are strung along the North Shore.

Population Shift

Between 2005 and 2035, Carlton (35.4%), Crow Wing (34.8%), and Pine (28.6%), all counties in the south, are predicted to grow. Koochiching (-7.6%), the Region’s most northwestern county, is predicted to lose population. The Region’s predicted growth average of 12.7% is below the predicted State average of 24.2%. In 2005, the Region had 8% of the State’s population; it is predicted that it will have 7% in 2030.
The Northwest Region

Overview

Coniferous Forest, Deciduous Forest, Tallgrass Aspen Parkland, and Prairie Grassland, all of the State’s four biomes, are found in Northwestern Minnesota, making the landscape of the Northwest the most varied and complex region. The Coniferous Forest Biome on the Region’s eastern edge has state forests and large, superb fishing lakes created by impounding the Mississippi River. All three million acres of Tallgrass Aspen Parkland Biome in Minnesota are in the Region. This biome is a transitional zone between the northern forest and the prairie. A few remnant areas of native grasses of the Prairie Grassland Biome are found among its flat and slightly rolling farmlands. Running diagonally from northwest to southeast across the Region, the Deciduous Forest’s landscape of hardwoods, moraines, and many glacial lakes make it a popular place for outdoor recreation. Leech Lake, Red Lake, and White Earth Bands of Ojibwe own large tracts of land in the Region. Long and narrow, it varies from north to south. In the north the Region is more sparsely populated and although the economy has become more diverse, agriculture is dominant. Itasca State Park, Minnesota’s oldest state park and the source of the Mississippi River, is in the Region’s center. The lakes and the forests of the Central Lakes and Mississippi Headwaters areas are attractive for second homes, retirement living, and vacations. The south has a very well developed biking and hiking trail system, while the north does not.

// The southern part of the Region is more developed and populated than the rest of the Region.
// Some of the largest lakes and most frequently used fishing lakes in Minnesota are in this Region.
// Land cover in the Region’s west is mostly cropland; in the east it’s forests, wetlands, and shrubs.
// The Region has large Indian reservations.
The Region’s glacial history is reflected in its current topography. The flat prairie in the west and north are part of the vast Glacial Lake Agassiz lakebed. The beach ridges immediately to the east were left as the lake diminished in size. The uplands, moraine, and outwash plains were created as the glaciers receded. The varied topography supports a variety of recreational experiences that tend to be concentrated in areas of higher relief.

Lakes, Rivers, & Water Trails
The Northwest Region has some of the largest lakes and most popular fishing lakes in the State. The Region’s myriad glacier-formed lakes provide the setting for the robust recreation economy of resorts, cabins, and second homes in the glacial lakes and headwaters areas. In its most northwestern area with few lakes, rivers have been impounded to make lakes.

The Region is also an area where rivers begin and flow north to Hudson Bay and south to the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi flows from Lake Itasca, the Red Lake from Lower Red Lake, and the Red from Lake Traverse. The Crow Wing, Otter Tail, and Pine rivers all start their winding journeys from lakes in the Region’s rolling moraine. The Region’s six water trails offer a variety of recreational experiences, and many communities are along their banks. The Mississippi Headwaters Segment starts at Itasca State Park and travels 50 miles before going through Lake Bemidji and Cass Lake. Bemidji State Park and the communities of Bemidji and Cass Lass are along it. Red Lake is main canoeing river in the northern part of Region. Thief River Falls, St Hilaire, Red Lake Falls, Crookston, Fisher, East Grand Fork, and an historic treaty site are along it. The 157-mile long Otter Tail River goes through three biomes. It changes from a clear, Northwoods River to a silted Prairie River, goes through a chain of lakes, has 30 water control structures and a mill on National Register, and passes through Detroit Lakes, Rochet, Frazee, Perham, Fergus Falls and Breckenridge. The 90-mile, shallow Crow Wing is a slow, family-oriented river that ends at Crow Wing State Park. It offers a “wilderness experience” and flows by Akeley, Nevis, Motley, Pillager, and county parks. The Pine starts at Backus; the City of Pine River and the Paul Bunyan Trail are along it. Offering both non-motorized and motorized boating, the Red flows past the Moorhead, East Grand Forks, and a number of smaller communities.
Ecological Subsections
The Northwest Region has eight of Minnesota’s 26 ecological subsections, reflecting the Region’s character as an area of morainal, prairie, and lowland landscapes.

Land Cover
The Region is characterized by cropland in the west and forests, wetlands, and shrubs in the east, with small areas of developed land scattered throughout.
The Northeast Region

Communities & Transportation
Most towns of 8,000 or larger are concentrated in the Glacial Lakes/Headwaters areas where recreational opportunities make retirement and second homes popular. Main rail lines to the West Coast run through the Region. Because like much of Greater Minnesota, many of the Region’s communities were developed on rail lines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most communities are located along active or abandoned rail corridors.

A web of state and federal highways run from southeast to northwest and north and south. Most of the scenic byways are concentrated in the Central Lakes and Headwaters areas, but one runs along the State’s western border and another along the Canadian border.

Historic Resources
The Region has one National Historic Landmark: the Rabideau CCC Camp. Of the 22 state parks with historically recognized Rustic Style WPA/CCC structures, six are in the Region. They are Buffalo River, Itasca, Lake Bemidji, Lake Bronson, Lake Carlos, and Old Mill State Parks. Old Mill also has an historic mill that is operated once a year. Itasca has a historic district with many elements. Crow Wing, Glendalough, and Zippel Bay State Parks also have historic sites.
The Region's population is concentrated in the southern half, in the Bemidji Area, and in a few communities in the northwest. Three of the northern counties have the lowest densities.

Population Distribution

The Region's population is concentrated in the southern half, in the Bemidji Area, and in a few communities in the northwest. Three of the northern counties have the lowest densities.

Population Shift

Populations in the Northwest Region's 24 counties are predicted to show both growth and decline. Beltrami (33.6%), Douglas (32.3%), Becker (26.7%), Cass (25.4%), and Clay (25.3%) are predicted to grow while Kittson (-25.1%), Traverse (-24.0%) and Wilkin (-6.0%) are predicted to lose population. The Region is predicted to grow by 16.5%, which is below the State's 24.2% predicted growth rate, and its share of the State's population is predicted to decline from 9% to 8%.
The South Region

Overview

The large Southern Region stretches across the bottom one third of the State and has two different biomes. The eastern half is Deciduous Forest; western is Prairie Grassland. A series of glaciers and glacial melt waters shaped most of the Region, but the southeastern corner was not glaciated. The Region's western portion is dominated by the presence of a flat landscape, the Minnesota River, prairie rivers, tributary streams, and many of the State's largest, most valuable, and productive farms. The State plays important roles in landscape preservation and natural resource-based recreation in the west because state managed lands preserve remnant landscapes in this highly altered and intensely farmed landscape. Many of the few remaining wetlands and riparian areas are wildlife management areas, scientific and natural areas, aquatic management areas, or parks.

Bounded by the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, Southeastern Minnesota has a plateau of rolling farmland, remnants of the Big Woods, a driftless area of eroded limestone hills, and a number of small rivers that flow east to the Mississippi. In areas of the Southern Region with few lakes, impounded rivers and streams create recreational lakes and swimming pools. State and local parks provide camping, picnicking, fishing, and hiking experiences amid a predominantly agricultural landscape.

Most of the population of the Region is in the east, which is expected to grow significantly.

The Region consists of deciduous forest in the east and prairie grassland in the west.

The Minnesota River valley cuts through the Region.
Flowing waters have played and continue to play important regional roles. The ancient glacial River Warren shaped the Minnesota River Valley, the Minnesota River flows through the Region’s heart, and the Mississippi River forms its eastern edge. Smaller rivers and streams are found throughout. Many of the smaller rivers are very popular trout streams. The driftless or non-glaciated area of Southern Minnesota has a series of small rivers with tributary streams that flow into the Mississippi River. Although rich in rivers and streams, some parts of the Region have few lakes. Impoundments in parks have created lakes in Lake Louise, Lake Shetek, and Lake Lac Qui Parle State Parks. Glaciers formed most of the region’s lakes. They are concentrated east and west of Saint Peter and in the diagonal band of moraine that stretches from north of Willmar to south of Hutchinson. In the west a series of glaciers made many prairie pothole lakes and wetlands. Before it was drained for farming, Southwestern Minnesota was known as “the duck factory” by hunters because this prairie pothole region teemed with waterfowl and aquatic animals, native prairie grasses and forbs, and some bison. Today, this flat land is dominated by a geometric pattern of large farms made possible by an extensive drainage network of drain tiles and drainage ditches. Many streams have been converted into drainage ditches as part of the drainage system. The Region’s larger rivers are all designated state water trails. Although seasonal flow variances limit their use at times, they are significant recreational resources for canoeing, kayaking, and in the case of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, motorized boating. There are many state and local parks along the water trails.
Ecological Subsections

Of Minnesota’s 26 ecological subsections, eight are in the South. They form a series of diagonal stripes across the Region from the Blufflands in the east to the Big Woods in the center to the prairie and the high moraine in the west. The Land Study (DNR 2000) identified the Rochester Plateau Subsection as one of the few subsections that has no state parks. It, along with the Hardwood Hills Subsection, were identified as subsections with the most biological themes that still need to be preserved in state parks or recreation areas. The Minnesota River Prairie and the Inner Coteau Subsections were identified as two subsections with the most geologic features that still need to be preserved in state parks or recreation areas.

Land Cover

Historically, the Region was prairie in the west and an eastern hardwood forest in the east that included the Big Woods. Most of the prairie has been converted into large, industrialized farms that spread like a green patchwork quilt across the landscape. The ravines, protected wetlands, and riparian lands have green fingers and patches of native vegetation. Some of the eastern forest remains, but much of the land is farmed.
The South Region

Communities & Transportation

In the east, the Region is populous and is expected to continue to grow as part of the growth corridor from Chicago to the Twin Cities. It has Rochester, the State’s third largest city, and nine micropolitan centers that are close to each other. It is home to the Prairie Island Indian Community and several Amish communities. In the west the Region has two regional centers, Mankato and Willmar, and six micropolitan centers that are farther apart. Two Dakota tribes, The Upper Sioux Community and the Lower Sioux Community, live and own land in the Minnesota Valley.

Because many of the Region’s cities were service centers for the developing agriculture economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many abandoned rail right-of-ways crisscross the region and many of its larger cities are on active rail lines. Although there are a number of abandoned rail corridors that have been converted into trail corridors, most remaining abandoned rail corridors are private agricultural lands and not currently available for trails. The Region is well served by federal and state highways. The Region’s five scenic byways follow the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, wind around the lakes by Willmar, and parallel the State’s western and southern borders. Many parks are on or within two miles of the byways.

Historic Resources

The Region’s parks also play an important role in preserving and interpreting the area’s historic sites in the Region. Cannomk’e, the Pipestone National Monument, is a sacred Native American quarry managed by the National Park Service. Indians occupied most of the park sites for thousands of years prior to European contact. Sites in Upper Sioux and Fort Ridgely State Parks played key roles in European settlement and Indian removal. Flandreau, Camden, and Fort Ridgely State Parks were sites of WPA camps. Flandreau was used as a German prisoner-of-war camp during World War II. The historic Forestville Town site is in Mystery Cave/Forestville State Park. Blue Mounds, Camden, Flandreau, Fort Ridgely, Lac Qui Parle, Lake Shetek, Minneopa, Monson Lake, Sibley, and Whitewater State Parks have many Rustic Style WPA/CCC structures on the National Register. Camden and Lake Louise have historic mill sites, and Lake Louise has the site of the historic Wildwood Park.
Population Distribution

The Region’s population is concentrated in Rochester, Mankato, and Willmar areas and in county seats. Its eastern half is more populous than its western half.

Figure 42 // Population distribution

Population Shift

Counties in the South Region show both growth and decline. Dodge (45.2%), Olmsted (38.2%), Rice (37.4%), Le Sueur (37.2%), Steele (30.5%), McLeod (23.1%), and Goodhue (22.0%) Counties, which are either adjacent to the Rochester Area or adjacent to the Metropolitan Area, are experiencing growth. The many counties in the south and west that are predicted to lose the highest percentage of their population are Lac qui Parle (-15.0%), Swift (-14.4%), and Watonwan (-11.7%). The Region is predicted to grow by 15.0%, which is below the State’s 24.2% predicted growth rate. In 2005 the Region had 19.3% of the State’s population, it is predicted to have 18% in 2035.

Figure 43 // Population shift