
Environmental Almanac: There's work to be done to protect our waters

Sun, 08/17/2014 - 7:00am | [Rob Kanter](#)



Photo by: Rob Kanter

Oil and other pollutants from nonpoint sources on the surface of the Second Street Basin in Champaign.

Last week in my column about fishing the Salt Fork River, I credited the federal Clean Water Act of 1972 for the comeback of that stream and others like it.

This week, I call attention to evidence that there's still much work to be done when it comes to protecting the public interest in clean water in the U.S.

In central Illinois, witness the years-long fight that's been necessary to keep PCB waste out of the Clinton Landfill, where it would threaten to contaminate the Mahomet Aquifer. Even with the water supply for

half a million people at stake and politicians of all stripes championing the cause, the outcome was in doubt until last month, when Governor Quinn ordered Illinois EPA not to permit it.

If I could, I would expand the concern that prompted people to take action on behalf of the Mahomet Aquifer because it's the source of our water to concern for the sources of everybody's water.

Statewide, more than nine million people depend on water that comes from rivers, impoundments and natural lakes, including Lake Michigan. Those bodies of water are fairly well protected against pollution from point sources, such as outfall pipes from sewage treatment plants or factories. But they are largely unprotected from nonpoint source pollution, whatever's carried into them by rain or snowmelt running over and through the ground.

What's carried into our streams and lake by rain and snowmelt? Oil and pollutants from roads and parking lots; pollution from the air that's picked up by raindrops; bacteria from pet waste, septic systems and livestock operations; weed killers, insect killers and fertilizer—some from landscaping around homes and businesses, some from golf courses and athletic fields, but the lion's share of it from conventional agriculture.

I'm reminded of the sad fact that we still accept nonpoint source pollution as normal every time I stop at the Second Street Basin in Champaign (which is often twice a day, on my way to and from work). The city has put up no signs prohibiting people from fishing or swimming there, activities the Clean Water Act says our waters should support. But nobody fishes or swims there. And I'd hazard few people ever contemplate doing either. The only pond in the center of town is choked with algae, and it's often topped with a sheen of oil.

On bigger bodies of water, where the problem of nonpoint source pollution has greater effects, it has made national news recently—maybe you saw coverage of what happened in Toledo, Ohio, over the first weekend of August? (That's while I was out fishing the Salt Fork River.) A toxic algae bloom on Lake Erie right at the intakes for city water supply rendered it unusable, so from Saturday to Monday residents and businesses were left high and dry.

This was not a freak occurrence on Lake Erie, which is in the midst of a sickening decline that began about 10 years ago. Large numbers of recreational anglers and the charter industry they support have been forced elsewhere or out of business by annual blooms of toxic algae, as have commercial fishing operations and many of the businesses that cater to north shore tourists. And the algae thrives on fertilizer pollution.

Fertilizer pollution traceable to the corn belt also causes the dead zone that forms each summer in the Gulf of Mexico, the size of which is typically announced in August along with reference to a state that's comparable in size to help with perspective. Scientists recently calculated the area of this year's Gulf dead zone to be 5,052 square miles—roughly the size of Connecticut—which is about average for the past five years.

The Clean Water Act, by means of which we've made such progress against point source pollution, leaves the regulation of nonpoint source pollution to the states. And to date, no state has taken effective action on the problem, as our annual algae blooms attest.

To add insult to injury, the Clean Water Act itself has suffered in the past 15 years, thanks to rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court that opened the door to all manner of questions about where it applies, questions that would have seemed ridiculous to the legislators who passed it or the president who signed it.

Was the Clean Water Act meant to protect "intermittent, ephemeral, and headwater streams"? The U.S. EPA estimates 1.6 million Illinoisans depend on public water supplies that rely on these sources. It's difficult to imagine they would have any doubts on the question.

Even so, a rule proposed by EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in March to clarify what "waters of the U.S." are protected by the Clean Water Act has met with a massive, well-orchestrated campaign of misinformation. Sadly, that's exactly what we've come to expect when our government agencies act on behalf of the public's interest in a clean environment.

Instead of addressing the challenge of the challenge of the twenty-first century, nonpoint source pollution, we're back on an issue that was settled in 1972.

Rob Kanter is a lecturer with the University of Illinois School of Earth, Society, and Environment. Environmental Almanac is supported in part by the UI Institute for Sustainability, Energy, and Environment, and can be heard on WILL-AM 580 at 4:45 and 6:45 p.m. on Thursdays.