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Too much of a good thing hurting local rivers, lakes

Speakers say runoff is cause of stinky algae; seminar attendees criticize lack of progress

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Herald Times Reporter

MANITOWOC — The causes of stinky, stomach-turning algae that washes on the Lake Michigan shoreline and turns away beachgoers are invasive mussels and phosphorous-loaded runoff, a researcher said Wednesday.

Lake Michigan's water is three times clearer than it was in the early 1990s, thanks to the invasive zebra and quagga mussels, said Dr. Harvey Bootsma, associate professor of the Great Lakes WATER Institute.

But clearer water allows more sunlight to enter the lake and, with the help of runoff that contains phosphorous, triggers the growth of Cladophora, said Bootsma, during a seminar on the health of Lake Michigan at the Wisconsin Maritime Museum.

Not much can be done about clearer water, Bootsma said, but phosphorous levels could be reduced. However, the amount of phosphorous in local Lake Michigan tributaries such as the Manistowic River has not significantly reduced since the mid-1970s. The primary source of phosphorous runoff in the Manistowic River is likely from agricultural land, he said.

Bootsma's findings were not news to Ron Schaper, who lives near Lake Michigan four miles north of Cleveland. Schaper attended Wednesday's presentation, which included a panel of agriculture, municipal stormwater and homebuilding experts, in the hopes that some progress has been made on solving the problem of too much runoff. Instead, it was the "same old, same old," he said.

"We all know that the phosphorous is coming from farms," Schaper said. "Agriculture is responsible for a large amount of phosphorous. The bottom line is how much of it is coming from up stream."

Schaper's comments were echoed by many seminar attendees, who believe runoff from local farms is the major factor in what's causing the health of Lake Michigan and its tributaries to decline.

But Steve Hoffman, a local crop consultant who also spoke, said farmers are doing what they can to prevent too many crop nutrients from seeping into local waterways. He said some farms must comply with nutrient management plans to keep track of soil nutrient levels and determine the amount of phosphorous that should be applied to the land.

Hoffman acknowledged that nutrient management plans can be enforced only if local government offers cost sharing to farmers. There is inadequate funding for cost sharing because it has not been assigned a high priority by elected officials. He said \$28,000 designated to the county for nutrient management plans covers only about 1,000 acres out of the 220,000 acres of farmland in the county.

"A lot of this takes technical assistance and there is less technical assistance available," he said.

Homeowners can help reduce runoff into the watershed by making sure yard and animal waste does not enter storm sewer drains, said Manitowoc storm water aide Janet Sosnosky, who likened the city's system of storm sewers to a "river beneath the streets."

Homeowners often don't need to use fertilizers that contain phosphorous on their lawns, Sosnosky said. Soil tests can determine how much fertilizer, if any, homeowners need, she said.

Also at the seminar, Jim Reif, of Jim Reif Builders, outlined erosion prevention tools such as silt fences, controls for deep slopes, vegetated buffers, and straw bales that homebuilders use to keep sediment filled runoff from entering storm drains.