

Editorial: Phosphorous causing decline of shoreline; time to consider ban

September 30, 2007

Manitowoc Herald Times Reporter

There is no doubt that phosphorous in Lake Michigan and the waterways feeding into the lake is one of the main factors in the declining health of the shoreline.

Excessive phosphorous combined with sunlight promotes the growth of Cladophora, better known as that stomach-wrenching algae that washes up on our beaches. The smell chases away residents and visitors alike.

Expert testimony at a recent seminar identified the primary source of phosphorous runoff in the Manitowoc River is likely from agricultural land. However, farms aren't the only source of phosphorous contamination. Homeowners who fertilize their lawns also may be contributing to the problem.

Many farms, and especially those near waterways or in watersheds, 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.

There is a cost-sharing program to help farmers with nutrient management plans, but it is woefully under-funded.

Most farmers have a difficult enough time making a living without having to learn the chemistry and biology of nutrient management plans. Technical assistance to help farmers comply with nutrient management programs is in short supply thanks to years of budget cuts.

Opponents of mega or factory dairy farms complain that these huge operations are the worse offenders because of the concentration of animals in a relatively small area. If these larger farms are near waterways, the danger of a manure runoff reaching the stream or creek is real.

Operators of the larger farms insist they are in compliance with the law and are the most highly regulated of all farming operations.

While the Lakeshore deeply appreciates the agricultural industry and all it contributes to the area, farmers must be extra vigilant in guarding against runoff problems.

Lakeshore residents can help by encouraging the state to provide the resources farmers need to effectively manage their property.

Homeowners and commercial facilities with landscaping also can do their part.

The first step is testing the soil on your lawn to see if you need a fertilizer that contains phosphorous. Some lawns may not even need the chemical. If that's the case, do the environment and your pocketbook a favor and buy a fertilizer that doesn't contain it.

If your landscaping does require phosphorous, make sure you understand how and when to apply it. Avoid applying the fertilizer when conditions might mean some of the chemical could end up in the street. Chemicals in the street eventually will go down the stormwater system, which empties into Lake Michigan.

Keeping pollutants out of Lake Michigan goes beyond preventing smelly algae. We take for granted the clean water that comes out of our kitchen taps. That may not always be the case.

It is time for the various political entities around the Lakeshore to consider banning the use of fertilizers containing phosphorous for home use. Other cities have taken this step. It is the right thing to do.

We can find more environmentally friendly substitutes to nurture our lawns. Eliminating phosphorous from non-farm use won't solve the algae problem, but it will help. We owe it to ourselves to be more thoughtful about what we put into the lake.