



Why impaired waters are a priority for Minnesota

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For more information on impaired surface waters, visit the MPCA's Web site at www.pca.state.mn.us/water/index.html.

The problem

Despite decades of progress in cleaning up water pollution, hundreds of Minnesota's lakes, rivers and streams are still not healthy enough for people to use safely and enjoy. These "impaired" waters do not meet water-quality standards and pose risks to people, aquatic life, and recreation. They can contain too much sediment, bacteria, mercury, phosphorus and other contaminants.

In their work to update the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) 2002 List of Impaired Waters (see at www.pca.state.mn.us/publications/reports/tmd1-2002list.pdf), Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) staff have identified 211 additional impairments. This brings the total for the 2004 Impaired Waters draft list to 1,916 impairments on 1,123 water bodies. (A single lake or stream may have multiple impairments.) The impairments affect 920 lakes and 203 streams throughout Minnesota.

The federal Clean Water Act requires the states to take specific steps to address these "impaired waters," including:

- Identify and list surface waters that fail to meet applicable water-quality standards.
- Evaluate impaired waters to determine sources of pollution and the amount of reduction needed to restore the waters.
- Make reasonable progress in cleaning up or restoring these waters.

Need for coordination

Due to resource limitations, the MPCA has fully assessed only 8 percent of the state's

river miles and 14 percent of its lakes for impairments. About 40 percent of the waters assessed are impaired by one or more pollutants. (This is consistent with the national average for assessment in other states.) Once all Minnesota waters have been assessed, we may have more than 10,000 impairments statewide, located in nearly every watershed in the state. This is a serious issue for Minnesota.

Responsibility for keeping our water resources healthy resides with individual citizens, businesses, and a number of state and local government agencies, including the MPCA, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the Board of Water and Soil Resources, counties, cities, soil and water conservation districts, and watershed districts.

Despite all these players in the game, water quality improvements are not happening rapidly enough. All of these entities must come together to meet the challenge of impaired waters. The good news is a diverse advisory group, facilitated by the Minnesota Environmental Initiative, along with the Clean Water Cabinet (created as part of Governor Pawlenty's Clean Water Initiative), are taking steps to get us there.

Why must impaired waters be addressed?

The first reason why Minnesota needs to address its impaired waters is that this is the only way our state's valuable water resources can be restored and protected.

Consider that:

- Minnesota has more surface waters than any other of the 48 contiguous states.



- A \$10-billion-a-year tourism industry is based on Minnesota's water resources, and water quality is important to a healthy agricultural and business economy.
- Public opinion surveys conducted by the MPCA and others show that Minnesotans rank protection of surface water as their top environmental priority.
- The situation with impaired waters is getting worse and it's not going to go away. We need to act now to restore and protect our valuable and precious surface waters.

Second, addressing impaired waters is a priority because it affects growth and the health of Minnesota's communities and economy. All Minnesotans depend on healthy water resources for development, growth and a good quality of life.

- The federal Clean Water Act prohibits new or expanded wastewater discharges to impaired waters. We are only beginning to understand the significance of this prohibition on community and economic growth.
- A recent Bemidji State University study of north-central Minnesota lakes found that property values decreased as water clarity worsened. The study found that for each three-foot increase in water clarity (as measured by Secchi disk), the value of lakeshore property rose by \$423 per foot of frontage. A three-foot decrease in water clarity cut values by \$594 per foot of frontage.
- The MPCA has found that of 1,405 permitted industrial and municipal wastewater facilities, 546 either discharge to an impaired water or discharge within the watershed of an impaired water.
- As communities throughout the state are learning, having an impaired water is not good. In addition to being a local environmental problem, communities are realizing increasingly that it is also a business growth and development problem. Communities in the Minnesota River Basin and northeastern Minnesota's Lake Superior Basin are beginning to experience constraints on new or expanded discharges to waters that are impaired. On these

impaired waters, completion of a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) study will be needed before permits allowing new or expanded discharges will be allowed.

The third reason impaired waters are a priority is the Clean Water Act's mandate requiring all states to address them.

- This mandate is currently underfunded. The MPCA receives a small amount of funds for assessing water quality and doing TMDLs. While more money is needed to adequately address these two areas, the biggest need is for money to implement restoration activities — an estimated \$600 million to \$3 billion will be required to address restoration for currently listed waters alone.
- Inadequate progress toward meeting this mandate has also led to lawsuits across the country. During the past 10 years, 22 of the 42 lawsuits that have been filed in 42 states and the District of Columbia have been successful. There is currently no such lawsuit in Minnesota.

Combine the federal mandate with the value Minnesotans place on their water resources and their importance to tourism, economic growth and community growth, and the issue of impaired waters clearly is a priority for the state.

For more information

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