



STATE EDITION



Group moves to lift EPA label from local watershed

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By Tom Gilchrist
TIMES WRITER

You've had a black eye for 22 years if you live around the Saginaw River or Saginaw Bay.

True, the mark's not visible and, most likely, it's nothing you even knew about. But water watchers will tell you the region has been listed as a polluted "Area of Concern" since 1978.

Bay City's William W. Wright figures enough progress has been on environmental problems that it's time to get off the list.

"The designation of this area as an Area of Concern probably doesn't mean very much to the average person - we don't all walk around thinking of this every day of the week," said Wright, 49, chairman of the Partnership for the Saginaw Bay Watershed.

"On the other hand, we're getting to the point where environmental conditions are such that we can delist as an Area of Concern, and that will mean that the environment will have become a lot better, and we'll all notice that," Wright said.

Several members of the partnership met the public this morning at the Saginaw Bay Visitor Center at Bay City State Recreation Area to present a report naming recommended actions to remove the bay and river as an Area of Concern.

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The International Joint Commission, composed of people appointed by the United States and Canada to oversee issues of importance to the Great Lakes, identified the river and bay as an Area of Concern.

An Area of Concern is a region with the most significant water quality problems on the Great Lakes. Forty-two Areas of Concern exist today, but residents of the Saginaw River and Saginaw Bay area are among the first on the lakes to consider asking environmental authorities to remove the designation.

"The IJC didn't put these designations out there to label areas dirty forever," said Wright, who works as planning director for the Saginaw County Metropolitan Planning Commission.

"They want areas delisted," Wright said. "We've been nibbling away at these (water-quality) problems for 20 some years, but we haven't really looked at it in terms of when we'll be done with this (Area of Concern label)."

Wright said leaders of Bay City, Saginaw and Bay County have overseen spending millions of dollars to "almost eliminate" spills of raw sewage into the Saginaw River during the last 20 years.

Residents of the Saginaw and Bay City areas "have made a tremendous investment to improve water quality and they've made a tremendous difference," Wright said.

"In the wintertime, people are now going out and ice fishing on the Saginaw River. I graduated in 1969 from Bay City (T.L.) Handy High School and back then, even during the coldest weather, part of the river wouldn't even freeze," Wright said.

Bacteria in sewage generates heat, which would prevent formation of ice, Wright said.

Some municipal sewage-treatment plants in the 22-county Saginaw Bay watershed "now have special processes to remove phosphates from the system," Wright said.

But phosphates found in household laundry detergents and additives still causes problems,

Wright said. Phosphates and sewage lead to algae blooms, "and phosphates are one of the primary nutrients that creates that muck out along the shore at Bay City State Recreation Area," Wright said.

The state Department of Environmental Quality, the Environmental Protection Agency and the International Joint Commission all would have to approve before authorities lift the designation of the bay and river as an Area of Concern.

A copy of the report presented today - "Measures of Success: Addressing Environmental Impairments in the Saginaw River and Saginaw Bay" - is available by computer at www.pscinc.com.

Wright said volunteers and workers in the Saginaw Bay and Saginaw River area will have to take and test water samples at various sites for several years before asking authorities to delist the region as an Area of Concern.

A major pollution problem remains on Middlegrounds island in the Saginaw River in Bay City, Wright said. Decades ago, workers used part of the island as a place to dump industrial wastes.

Later, locals chose to dump residential trash on top of the industrial wastes.

"There's a huge pool of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) under the Middlegrounds landfill," Wright said. "The groundwater and river water get cycled through the soil at the bottom of the river.

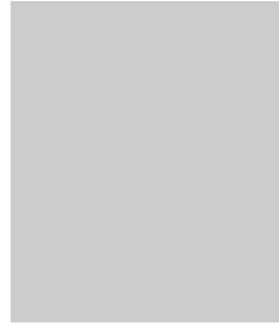
"There's not any separation, so (pollutants) down there just migrate into the river."

PCBs are a suspected cause of cancer. The PCBs and other industrial pollutants buried on Middlegrounds island "have 100 feet of garbage piled on top of them, so if you ever did want to get down there and clean it all up, think about what you'd have to dig through just to get at it," Wright said.

"I think there's a fear among environmentalists that we'll try to overblow the whole celebration - that we'll get delisted as an Area of Concern and say, "The job's done so we can all relax and forget about it.'

"But we'd like to get that scarlet letter off our chest. Let's get the worst of our problems dealt with. Believe me, we'll still have plenty of problems to keep us busy (if authorities delist the bay and river as Area of Concern)."

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