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THE MACOMB DAILY NEWS [Email] [Print]

\$10 million allocated for lake cleanup plan

County also steps up hunt for source of beach's pollution.

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By Chad Selwski
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Lake St. Clair entered the spotlight this week as Washington lawmakers offered a massive \$10 million a year for cleanup efforts, and county officials launched another attempt to solve the pollution mystery in New Baltimore.

The U.S. Senate sent the House a bill that would allocate \$10 million annually to implement a 2005 plan to improve Lake St. Clair's environment. The 200-page report was produced by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Senate provision authorizes the Corps to work in partnership with state and local governments to implement its 110 anti-pollution recommendations.

The Corps' "call to action," six years in the making, outlined six priority areas: the environmental health of the Lake St. Clair watershed, human health, animal habitat, land use, fisheries and recreational boating, and water quality monitoring.

Doug Martz, chairman of the Macomb County Water Quality Board, said the funds could be used for projects that examine contaminants in the sediment of the lake and Clinton River or to expand programs that track illegal sewage discharges.

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Lake algae outbursts, storm water runoff and sewer system overflows could also be targeted, said Martz, adding that \$10 million is not an exorbitant amount.

"Damn right we could use it all. We could use it for all kinds of things. I could see where we would spend it easy," he said.

The \$10 million allocation was inserted into the Water Resources Development Act by U.S. Sens. Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow, both Michigan Democrats. The bill still faces a long road toward final approval.

It first goes to a House-Senate conference committee for debate. The House last year authorized half the Senate amount – \$5 million – for Lake St. Clair. If final authorization is granted, the allocation then heads to the congressional appropriations process, which will be undertaken next year.

U.S. Rep. Sander Levin said the annual Senate allocation, which does not specify the number of years of funding, is a relatively small portion of all the projects needed to help the lake. Levin pointed out that \$300 million worth of federal assistance has been directed to anti-pollution sewer projects for the lake since 1995.

"It's going to take more than that (\$10 million a year). This is only a first step," said Levin, a Royal Oak Democrat who represents most of Macomb County.

More than \$500 million worth of sewer improvement projects have been completed across southeast Michigan to upgrade water quality in the lake over the past decade, but beach closings still occur. This summer, the Blossom Heath beach in St. Clair Shores has been closed since June 27 due to high E. coli bacteria levels.

The New Baltimore beach is the subject of a 2-month study announced Thursday by Macomb County Public Works Commissioner Anthony Marrocco. Officials have been puzzled for several years about why the swimming area suffers numerous closings each year, almost always in August and September.

"It's a big mystery why the bacteria is high mainly in the late summer – and we hope this extensive study will help solve that mystery," Marrocco said.

The beach rarely closed in the 1990s when other Lake St. Clair beaches were plagued by pollution. But the facility closed 168 times from 2001 to 2005.

A county Health Department investigative team walked miles of drains in the New Baltimore area looking for illegal sewage discharges. They also conducted hundreds of dye tests that tracked the flow from toilets in homes and businesses.

But no source for the pollution was found.

Lynne Seymour, Public Works environmental engineer, said the county has "exhausted all the avenues" of pollution emerging from sewers or drain pipes.

Marrocco's team, with the help of a \$57,000 state grant, will take a different approach. It wants to determine if the source is human waste or animal waste, such as bird droppings.

When high levels of E. coli bacteria are found in water or sand samples, the results will be shipped to a laboratory in Miami, Fla., for DNA testing to determine if the source is human waste or animal waste. However, if non-human waste is the culprit, the tests will not pinpoint what animal is the source.



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Water testing will be conducted at seven sites: at the beach, located at the foot of Washington Street, and at an adjacent site for a proposed second beach; at two locations on Crapau Creek, which drains into the lake; Vandevenne Drain at 25 Mile Road; Benoit Drain on Arnold Road in St. Clair County; and an unnamed drain north of 26 Mile Road.

Another area of concern for environmental officials is the Sweeney Drain in Fraser, which ranked as one of the dirtiest waterways in Macomb County in May and June. That drain flows into the lake via the Clinton River.

At the county Water Quality Board meeting this week, Fraser officials outlined their plans, mandated by the state, to eliminate the city's periodic discharges of raw sewage into the Sweeney Drain near 15 Mile Road.

The city has dumped 824,000 gallons of sewage into the drain so far this year when sewer overflows occur during rainstorms. The seventh discharge of 2006 occurred July 16-17.



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