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MPCA Reports: Mississippi River-Brainerd Area Watershed has good water quality overall, but also plenty of opportunities for improvement

Brainerd, Minn. – According to new draft reports released by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), the Mississippi River – Brainerd Area Watershed (MRBW) has a mix of good water quality that needs protecting, and also lakes and streams that have degraded and are in need of improvement.

The MRBW is located in the north central region of Minnesota. This watershed drains approximately 1,682 square miles and spans portions of Aitkin, Crow Wing, Morrison and Todd counties. Major cities within the watershed include Aitkin, Brainerd/Baxter and Little Falls. There are many lakes and streams in the watershed, offering exceptional fishing, boating, and other recreational opportunities. Permanent residents, seasonal cabin owners, and resort patrons whom contribute greatly to local economies use these water resources.

The MPCA is seeking public comments through July 1, 2020, about the protection and restoration strategies described in the water quality reports. The first report, known as a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL), establishes the amount of each pollutant that a water body can accept and still meet water quality standards. The MRBW TMDL study addressed phosphorus impairments in eleven lakes, bacteria impairments in eight streams, and biological impairments in two streams.

The TMDL found that nine of the 41 assessed streams in the watershed had high levels of bacteria, and 16 streams do not meet standards for aquatic life (fish and bugs). In addition, 18 of the 92 assessed lakes do not meet aquatic recreation standards for swimming and fishing. Fish populations in four of 61 assessed lakes did not meet the expected standards.

The MPCA identified several stressors to aquatic life in the watershed, including low dissolved oxygen (DO) concentrations, excess nutrients, stream connectivity, flow alteration, excess sediment, and lack of habitat. Low DO concentrations are identified throughout the impaired streams. Many of the low DO concentrations are linked to watersheds that have a high percentage of wetland acres that export low DO water. Ditching is also prevalent in a number of the low DO reaches. Ditching has altered water flow through the stream system by increasing peak flow or by diminishing low flow. Ditching is also playing a role in the lack of suitable habitat in certain streams. In a few cases, cattle pastured in riparian areas have caused channel instability and habitat degradation. Biological impairments in the urban areas are affected by stormwater runoff.

The second report, called a Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS), is required by the state Clean Water Legacy Act, and uses the TMDL, monitoring results, and other information to develop strategies for addressing all pollution sources in the watershed. The objective of the WRAPS process is to develop strategies that not only restore impaired waters but also protect the unimpaired waters from degradation. The WRAPS report showed that the MRBW has areas that are quite healthy, and protection strategies will help keep them that way. The Nokasippi River, classified as an exceptional use stream, is a focus for protection. The WRAPS also identifies solutions to restore waters that have become degraded.

Strategies for addressing the identified issues in the watershed include protecting and restoring lake and stream water quality by preserving or establishing native vegetation, reducing stormwater runoff in urban areas and around lakes, managing livestock and associated wastes according to established rules and guidance, and restoring altered stream hydrology.

“This watershed is an important source of drinking water for millions of people downstream,” said Katrina Kessler, MPCA’s assistant commissioner of water. “This region has an abundance of beautiful lakes that make it an important recreational destination.”

The draft reports are available on the MPCA’s [Mississippi River-Brainerd Watershed webpage](#), or at the St. Paul MPCA office, 520 Lafayette Road North. Submit comments to Bonnie Finnerty, MPCA, 7678 College Road, Baxter, MN, 56425, or by email to, bonnie.finnerty@state.mn.us by 4:30 p.m. on July 1. For more information, contact Finnerty at 218-316-3897, or toll-free at 800-657-3864.

Written comments must include a statement of the respondent’s interest in the report, and the requested action required by the MPCA, including specific changes to sections of the draft report and the reasons for making those changes.

More information on all of Minnesota’s 80 major watersheds is available on the [MPCA’s watershed web pages](#).

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