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Lake stewards keep the faith to continue phosphorous fight

By Todd S. Bergmann, Thursday, February 28, 2019

Phosphorous levels are slowly increasing in Manitowoc County lakes.

Gene Weyer, water quality testing director and former president of the Manitowoc County Lakes Association, displayed graphs of phosphorous levels on 16 areas lakes to those gathered at the association's Feb. 21 meeting.

The levels of the element generally increase, but while some lakes have increasingly higher levels, others had good results, he said.

Every lake needs some phosphorous, but too much can cause problems, Weyer said.

"Phosphorous is going to grow a lot of weeds," he said. "What is not taken up by weeds, is going to go into algae. There is going to be chlorophyll."

Too much phosphorous makes lake waters unappealing to humans, Weyer said.

"When you look down at the water, you always think, 'Would I like to jump in?' " he said. "If you say, 'Yeah, I would like to jump in,' that is good news. If you say, 'Yeah, I am not so sure,' that is bad news.

"You always have to be able to say, 'If I jump in, am I going to see my feet?' You always want to see your toes. That is important."

Several years ago, Weyer organized volunteers to measure and collect data on area lakes and report that information to the state Department of Natural Resources, because no current data was available on the health of the lakes, according to Tom Ward, president of the association.

"Gene saw a need to start a baseline," Ward said. "Now, we have enough years, so that we can see some of those trends."

The data volunteers collected is worth more than $10,000, Weyer said.

People who belong to lake and fishing associations care about the quality of the water, Weyer said.

They are willing to do the volunteer stuff to get it done," he said. "The DNR is always helpful. But, they can be more helpful if we help them."

Lakes the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers impaired with high phosphate levels include Hartlaub, Weyers, Bullhead, Silver, Harpt, Gass and Carstens, Weyer said.

"Silver, Carstens and Gass, it goes out of sight," he added.

Hartlaub Lake has had spikes around 140 micrograms per liter, while 20 is the EPA's dividing line, Weyer said. Bullhead Lake also had high numbers, which are increasing, Weyer said.

"There are some potential things going on here," he said.

The phosphorous numbers for Silver Lake have been increasing, but they decreased in 2014 and 2015, because of work at the boat launch to reduce flooding, Weyer said.

"Now, I think we've got internal loading," he said.

Internal loading happens in Bullhead and Silver lakes when phosphorous gets released after being tied up in the sediment, typically in spring, Ward said.

"That is not storm related," he said. "It is probably past storms that have accumulated.…It will take years and years and years to get rid of it."

In addition, Weyer said Silver Lake had low numbers following alum treatment in 2004.

Although higher in phosphate, Weyer said Harpt Lake has improved from near 180 to near 50 mg/l in ice-out phosphorous, possibly because of the closing of a nearby dairy farm.

However, DNR data shows that Harpt Lake has had problems with chloroform or green water, he said. Carstens Lake has problems, Weyer said.

"There is potentially a fix coming," he said. The Carstens Lake Association expects $300,000 from the DNR for a lake plan, director Brian Robley said.

Weyer said the plan came as a result of the lakes association's activity over several years. Despite a huge amount of money and effort, he said Long Lake has a high level of phosphorus.

Gass also has a large amount of phosphorous coming in, Weyer added.

"Working with U.S. Fish & Wildlife, the DNR and grassroots people, we might have a solution to getting this thing fixed," he said. "That 6-acre lake gets more fishing pressure than any other lake… in several counties. The reason is that it's right next to Manitowoc."

Carstens and Gass lakes have a trend where people say, "We've got to do something," Ward said. The lakes association has helped groups representing several lakes get grants to address problems, he said.

"Then you do multiple grants," Ward said. "We never quite seem to get the answer right as to what is causing the problem."

Weyer said English Lake has one of the lowest phosphorous levels because it can absorb large amounts.

"It is a deep lake," he said. "It has a lot of phosphorous. Big-time numbers. It just soaks it up.

"Each lake has its own characteristics."

Boating traffic on shallow lakes mixes the water to prevent phosphorous from stratifying, Weyer said.

Other lakes low on phosphorous include Pigeon, Cedar, Wilke, Tuma, Shoe,

Horseshoe and Spring, based on July and August samples, Weyer said.

"Pigeon Lake, Cedar Lake, those are the two lakes we would like to emulate," he said.

For years, Pigeon Lake had phosphorous levels near 20, but in 2018 had a 66, Weyer said.

"This can't be right," Weyer said. "You must have done the test wrong. Eventually, it is going to flush out. Don't worry."

He showed some charts, which have one or two years with high phosphorous and 20 or 30 years with low levels.

Several lakes had high numbers in 2017, because of a big rain event, Ward said.

"Because of big storms, we have seen water clarity take a dive," he explained. Cedar Lake has low numbers, Weyer said.

"Look at these nice numbers," he said. "You've got great land value. You've got great boating opportunities.

You've got great fishing opportunities, a pristine lake and high taxes."

From 2013 to 2018, Horseshoe Lake had test results below 20, which will increase land value, Weyer said.

"You've got to be happy," he said. Spring Lake also has low phosphate numbers, Weyer said.

"It is looking nice and clear there," he said. "You can jump in and see forever and still see the sky."