

Features

Cleaner streams goal of Lake Michigan Tributaries Watershed study

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BRIDGMAN — Weko Beach along Lake Michigan in Bridgman is a gem frequented by locals and tourists alike.

It, along with several other Southwest Michigan beaches, are known for sandy beaches and crystal clean water.

But on the south side of Weko Beach is a small stream called Tanner Creek. This creek is one of several small tributaries that drain directly into Lake Michigan that are not part of larger watershed management plans, said Marcy Hamilton, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission in Benton Harbor. If the water in any of these creeks is polluted, the beaches near them are affected, she said.

"It's all connected," she said during a recent walk along Tanner Creek. "Water is life. That's what we depend on."

She said closing the beaches in the summer due to high E. coli counts is not only gross, but costs the area tourism dollars.

Last fall, Hamilton said, her agency received a \$472,185 state grant to study streams from Stevensville to the Indiana line to create the Lake Michigan Tributaries Watershed Management Plan.

"The reason we went after this is because the (Berrien County) Health Department, when they were doing some beach testing a couple of years ago, was getting quite a few high E. coli counts along the beaches in the southern part of the county," she said.

The health department reported there were between five and 12 beach closures due to high E. coli levels each summer between 2012 and 2015.

"Some work has been done with the Health Department and The Conservation Fund to fix the problem," Hamilton said. "They've found some problem areas and got some things fixed, but there's no real overall plan for this area. We need to figure out what's going on."

Hamilton said E. coli is a bacteria indicator of waste, which can come from manure, wildlife, farm animals, or failing septic or sanitary sewer systems.

She said human waste means the stream is probably being polluted by a failing septic system or a crack in sanitary sewer line.

Peg Kohring, midwest director of the The Conservation Fund, said the Lake Michigan Tributaries Watershed Management Plan will be focused on 12 creeks from the Michigan-Indiana line ("they call it the White Ditch") to Grand Mere State Park near Stevensville. She noted that the Galien River itself is not part of the project.

"Those 12 creeks have all had beach closings associated with them. And where we've been able to spot check various places we haven't been able to locate the source comprehensively."



Marcy Hamilton, senior planner for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, walks along Tanner Creek as it flows into Lake Michigan on the southern edge of Weko Beach in Bridgman. The agency is using a state grant to study small streams. - photo by Don Campbell

Organizations and agencies involved in the project include the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, Chikaming Open Lands, the Berrien County Health Department and The Conservation Fund. In addition to the Lake Michigan Tributaries Watershed Management Plan grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Kohring said the effort to find non-point sources of contamination also received \$50,000 from The Pokagon Fund and \$1,000 from the Shorewood Homeowners Association.

Kohring said The Conservation Fund will seek to get local beach associations involved once it's determined which areas are the most affected by potential contamination.

Kohring said areas along creeks where there is a great deal of erosion allowing soil to enter the water can become "a breeding ground of E. coli."

She said restoring wetland areas along the creeks with help from Chikaming Open Lands in high-erosion zones is expected to help "stop the flush" and hopefully lower E. coli counts.

"That is a critical part of what we're doing — identifying those wetlands that need to be protected, the wetlands that need to be restored, and figuring out which streams are the most unstable," she said.

Kohring said those involved in the project also plan to explain why it's important not to mow and remove vegetation at the base of the stream and engage in other activities that make such areas more flood prone and allow sediments to flow in during heavy rains and snow melts.

Another major source of E. coli and other potentially harmful contamination in creeks involves old and improperly set up septic systems — an area area environmental organizations and the Berrien County Health Department have been wrangling with for years. She added that nearly 50 problem septic systems have been located and dealt with, often by working with landowners to figure out a way to pay for upgrades.

"The Berrien County Health Department has been wonderful doing that ... I know we don't have them all."

Kohring said a new strategy to deal with septic-based sources — "ship and sniff" — will be employed this year.

"The Southwest Michigan Planning Commission has hired an intern to go to every road-stream crossing and collect water samples and ship them to the dogs (via a lab in Lansing)," she said.

Those specially trained dogs, from environmental Canine Services, have searched for sources of contamination in the area on several previous occasions. If a water sample causes one of the septic-sniffing dogs to send an alert signal, Kohring said it will help narrow down the exact areas where problems exist.

The canine crew also is expected to search areas where ship and sniff samples came up positive in July.

"Every 20 years there's another system that's going bad, so depending on where there were waves of building then there are going to be waves of septic systems going bad," Kohring said. "It's kind of like keeping the Augean Stables clean. Seems impossible, but we're trying."