By Elisabeth Lisican

Keeping Our Lakes Great

I recently moved into a new apartment that includes a view of Lake Michigan. I find this view to be both a calming and energizing backdrop to my daily routine, and enjoy being able to gaze upon the water whenever I like.

Watching the lake makes me more aware of—and grateful for—my home city of Chicago's water supply as well as all of the recreation it offers, especially in light of all the talk lately about toxic tap water.

One particularly alarming report I stumbled across recently was one about Illinois' neighbor to the north, Wisconsin, from the Green Bay Press-Gazette. The article said that the proposed U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Impaired Waters List for 2016 for Wisconsin includes 1,694 listings—more than double the 761 that made the list in 2004.

Dean Hoegger, president and executive director of the Clean Water Action Council of Northeast Wisconsin, told the newspaper he was astonished that the list could increase like that—astonished and dismayed.

The significance here is the number of those polluted waterways that flow into Lake Michigan, environmentalists say, as the Great Lakes provide the largest source of freshwater in the world.

Phosphorus pollution is a particular issue for the troubled waters in Wisconsin, as 56% of the new impaired waters listings are for total phosphorus that exceeds the limit in the Clean Water Act. Non-point sources of pollution are extremely challenging to control, and Lake Michigan beaches have been impacted by the contamination.

The article highlighted U.S. Geological Survey researcher Steven R. Corci's study, which found that most of the contamination at three Lake Michigan beaches could be traced to pollution from human sewage and bovine viruses.

Hoegger told the Press-Gazette that agricultural expansion can be blamed for a large portion of Lake Michigan's phosphorus problems. Critics of Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker blamed him for cutting the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) budget so much that runoff monitoring has been rendered almost impossible. It also should be noted, however, that DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp looked to the positive side, saying that Wisconsin surface water quality is "good and improving in many places."

But tell that to the beach lovers of Wisconsin who may have discovered algae occupying their once-pristine favorite spots.

Phosphorus control is important, and one of the articles in this issue of W&WD dives into this topic in "Phosphorus Control Strategy" on page 14. The solutions to issues like the ones Wisconsin's waters are facing undoubtedly are complex and challenging, but they boil down to one thing: everyone doing his or her part to ensure that we can see all surface waters—and, ultimately, our beloved Great Lakes—in their best light.

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