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Environmental Protection Commission and DNR review history of requested action on numeric nutrient criteria in Iowa's lakes

Historical review of requests to set numeric nutrient criteria spans decades

Des Moines, Iowa -- The **Environmental Protection Commission (EPC)**, an oversight group for the **Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR)**, today heard a summary of the history of activity related to a petition filed by the **Iowa Environmental Council (IEC)** and **Environmental Law & Policy Center (ELPC)** to establish numeric nutrient criteria to protect Iowa's recreational lakes.

IEC and ELPC filed the petition with the IDNR in November, making this the second time in five years the two groups have petitioned the state agency to take this action to protect Iowa's recreational lakes. During their December meeting, the Environmental Protection Commission was presented with a timeline on the issue by DNR staff, chronicling 20+ years of EPA and DNR activity. DNR staff is expected to bring their recommendation related to the current petition at an upcoming EPC meeting for a vote.

Following the meeting, IEC's Water Program Director noted that despite a list of actions that spanned decades, all of the activity has failed to result in what is really necessary: setting and adopting the numeric criteria limits necessary to protect Iowa's recreational lakes.

The current IEC and ELPC petition calls on the IDNR to adopt the numeric criteria recommended in 2008 by a scientific panel convened by IDNR. As noted in the DNR's timeline presented at today's EPC meeting, the IDNR never adopted the panel's recommended criteria. Such criteria would establish benchmarks for the state's recreational lakes, identifying the threshold amount of nutrient pollution that Iowa lakes can withstand while still supporting safe recreational uses. Establishing numeric nutrient criteria as requested by the petition is necessary to protect Iowa lakes designated for recreational use and is therefore required under the federal Clean Water Act.

"Setting numeric limits for nutrient pollution in our lakes is essential for protecting public health and the environment," says Josh Mandelbaum, an attorney at ELPC. "These limits provide a clear, non-variable standard for the state to use to assess water quality, determine which of our lakes are excessively polluted, and decide when and where to take action – before recurring algae blooms become an even larger problem than they already are."

Agriculture is a primary source of nutrient pollution (i.e., nitrogen and phosphorus), according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). When levels of nutrient pollution become excessive, they can cause harmful algal blooms, also called cyanobacteria or “blue-green” algae, to grow in lakes. Under certain conditions, these blooms can release toxins like microcystin that can cause illnesses in people and animals.

The IDNR has routinely monitored for microcystin at state park beaches located at Iowa lakes. The monitoring data shows an overall increasing trend in the number of microcystin exceedances/advisories issued by the IDNR annually since 2006. The 2012 Nutrient Reduction Strategy sets no specific numeric nutrient goals or benchmarks for specific water bodies in Iowa, making it difficult to accurately measure how far the state has come toward reaching the 45% reduction without numeric criteria to measure against. After six years of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy, Iowa lakes remain threatened by excessive nutrient pollution.

Utilizing numeric nutrient criteria would provide transparency, improve decision making, and increase fiscal responsibility, argues Cindy Lane, Water Program Director at IEC. “There are limited public dollars to restore our lakes and implement protective conservation practices. Knowing which lakes have exceeded or are close to exceeding recommended levels of nutrient pollution will allow the state to better utilize those limited resources and triage our most important recreational lakes first – lakes that may also be designated for drinking water use or that generate significant economic benefits.”

According to a recent IDNR report on lake restoration, visits to Iowa lakes generate \$1.2 billion in annual spending. 6 in 10 Iowans visit lakes in the state multiple times in a year.

The environmental groups and the EPA have been calling on the state to set numeric criteria for more than a decade. The recent petition is the second request by the IEC and ELPC to adopt these standards. Says Mandelbaum, “It’s time for the DNR to act on the scientific evidence and the requirements of the Clean Water Act. It is time to adopt these lake standards to protect the public health and economic well-being of Iowans who rely on, use and enjoy their lakes.”

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The **Iowa Environmental Council (IEC)** is an alliance of diverse organizations and individuals working together to protect Iowa's natural environment. Founded in 1995, it is the largest and most comprehensive environmental coalition in the state. Through education, advocacy and coalition building, the Council raises awareness, generates action and creates large-scale change that makes Iowa a better place to live, work and explore. Learn more at iaenvironment.org.