

The Problem of Phosphorus Loading to the Kalamazoo River Watershed : How can I help?

Imagine walking a scenic trail along a beautiful river, listening to the water burbling, the birds singing. Sounds nice, doesn't it? Now imagine that river is the Kalamazoo River. A few years back that would have been inconceivable. But that day may be coming. Anyone who has lived around here a while knows that the Kalamazoo River and many of the streams, lakes and wetlands flowing to it have had water quality problems. Because of a variety of pollution reduction programs, some of these water quality problems have been eliminated or greatly reduced, however, our work isn't done yet.

One of the major remaining water quality problems is nutrient enrichment. This can lead to algal blooms, low oxygen levels, poor water clarity, and a fish community dominated by non-sport fish such as carp. Scientists know that phosphorus is usually the primary cause of nutrient enrichment.

The DEQ and many local governmental and industrial facilities have joined together to reduce the Total Maximum Daily Loading, or TMDL, of phosphorus to the river. This voluntary reduction effort is receiving national recognition for its watershed-wide, community-based approach. For more information, please go to kalamazooriver.net and check out the Phosphorus TMDL. Industrial and municipal point sources, however, only account for about 35% of the total load. The remaining 65% comes from a variety of sources including storm water runoff from roads, parking lots, lawns, farms, industry, and commercial activities, from stream bank erosion, from poorly functioning septic systems, and from livestock, pets and wildlife.

As a citizen of this community, you can help by doing your part to reduce phosphorus loading. Here are a few ideas:

Whether your household sewage goes to a septic system or into the sewer system that ends up treated at the local wastewater treatment plant, you can reduce phosphorus loading by checking the ingredients in your cleaning and laundry supplies. Try low or no phosphorus brands.

If you own your own home, there are several things you can try mostly related to the rain water runoff from your yard. Start with trying to avoid the over-application of phosphorus-containing fertilizer. Have your soil tested. You may not need to fertilize which can save you money. You could consider reducing the size of your lawn with native plantings. Or you could make efforts to keep rainwater on your property, it is cheaper than running a sprinkler. Anything you can do to keep fertilizer, pet wastes and lawn wastes out of the storm sewers will help. Remember that most rain water goes directly to the river without treatment and every little reduction helps.

If you live on or near the river or any body of water, there are more actions you can take. These include stabilizing river banks or lakeshore to control run-off. You could put in native plantings to help keep the soil in place. If you do have a septic system, make sure it is well maintained and operating properly.

If you farm, participate with your conservation district and extension programs to reduce phosphorus lost by tillage, fertilizer and manure.

In these ways, you can help turn the Kalamazoo River from a bane on our community into a boon for our community. We have made tremendous progress. Together we can make the Kalamazoo River a positive resource that we can all enjoy.