

Ripple Effect #22

Clean Water for All

Clean water—we all want it—we want to drink it, we want to play in it, we want to catch fish from it. We don't want to smell foul odors or see unsightly, oily sheens, green slime, car tires, or plastic bags. You might wonder, what laws protect water quality in the Red River Basin?

The Clean Water Act, established by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1972, regulates U.S. water quality standards. States are required to develop standards, which the EPA approves, then they must act toward maintaining water quality based on the pre-determined “beneficial uses” established for the water body, whether it is a stream or lake. The three main beneficial uses are: aquatic life (fishable), recreation (swimmable) and drinking water (drinkable). A fourth identified use is for industrial/agriculture or other local needs.

Environment Canada established water quality protection regulations in 1987. Canada's regulations also establish protection for beneficial uses similar to the U.S. and are also similar in delegating authority to the provinces for further development of standards unique to their geographical area. Citizens throughout the basin can become involved in the process of setting goals and defining how their local waters should be managed. In the Red River Basin, the North Dakota Department of Health monitors the water quality based on certain established criteria; the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is responsible for determining the beneficial uses and water quality standards, and in South Dakota, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources identifies the water impairments. Manitoba Water Stewardship provides regulatory aspects for the province.

All state water quality monitoring agencies must identify whether the beneficial uses identified are being “fully supported,” “partially supported,” “threatened” or “not supported.” If the water quality standard isn't “fully supported,” then the state agency must establish a “total maximum daily load” (TMDL) report identifying what parameter is causing the impairment and prescribe actions to bring the water quality back to a “fully supporting” status.

Citizens need to know the status of water quality health in their local area. You can attend public meetings held by state or provincial agencies to discuss the status of the water quality and the actions needed to return the water to a “fully supported” level. Watch for announcements in your local newspaper about

public meetings, or, better yet, contact your state/provincial agency and find out what the water quality status is of your local stream or lake.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)