

Ripple Effect #88

No Swimming Allowed

Could our actions today be pounding in future 'NO SWIMMING ALLOWED' signs? That seems to be the case as we see levels of excess nutrients gradually increase in the rivers and lakes of our Red River Basin, likely a result of human practices.

These excess nutrients, phosphates and nitrogen in specific, get into our rivers and lakes and 'fertilize' their aquatic plants. This turns natural vegetation into trouble. When algae blooms become excessive, they cause big problems, whether reducing oxygen supplies for fish, clogging irrigation flows, or impairing our own drinking water supplies.

When one particular species of algae, blue green, grows too much, it can produce toxins potent enough to close beaches. This happened in 2003 on a beach on Lake Winnipeg, the mouth of our Red River Basin's waters. Lake Winnipeg's beaches have remained open these last several years. But from all reports, the increasing nutrient load in this 10th largest freshwater lake in the world has not been solved.

And the problem of excessive blue green algae is not confined to Lake Winnipeg. In 2007, a press release from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency reported that blue green algae was being spotted in the lakes area earlier than usual. At least one newspaper that ran the press release warned its readers in bold print, "When in doubt, best keep out."

Admittedly, some of the phosphorus and nitrogen behind the problem of excessive algae come from natural sources that are difficult to control - soil, decaying plant matter, even the atmosphere. But our own human practices add to the problem - municipal sewage, septic fields, crop fertilizers, industrial discharges, livestock manure, urban runoff carrying lawn fertilizers and pet waste, among others. It is these that are likely the main contributors to the gradual but steady rise in levels of nutrients in waters throughout the Basin since the early 1970s.

Many regard this increase - whether in Lake Winnipeg or in the Basin's rivers - as "the single, largest water quality challenge" facing us in the Red River Basin.

Responses to the problem have begun by both citizen groups and government. Minnesota led the way in 2002 by restricting the use of turf fertilizers that contain phosphorus. Just this year Manitoba instituted the Nutrient Management Regulation Act, which encourages responsible nutrient management, regulates some applications and restricts some facilities in environmentally sensitive areas. Citizens' groups continue to encourage use of phosphorus-free dishwater detergents, one of our biggest indoor culprits.

How many "DO NOT SWIM" signs will we see in our future here in the Basin? That will depend on the will of all of us working at every level to keep our waters clean and inviting for decades to come.

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law. Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

