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Ohio EPA Seeking Comments on Portage River Watershed Water Quality Improvement Report

Siltation and bacteria are the most common impairments in the Portage River watershed, according to a new [draft report](#) released by Ohio EPA. The report details findings from stream studies conducted by Agency staff in 2008 and includes suggestions for improving water quality. Ohio EPA is seeking public comments on the report through August 15, 2011.

Ohio EPA sampled 84 stream sites within the 585-square-mile watershed. Most of the streams in the watershed (60 percent) are meeting aquatic life use goals, although nearly half of the tributary streams did not meet goals for fish and other aquatic life. Recreation use goals, which consider risk levels with exposure to pathogens, are not being met in 88 percent of the streams.

The primary causes of the impairments are excess fine sediment and fertilizers from agricultural drainage, as well as routine channel maintenance. In addition, discharges and runoff from failing home septic systems are a major source of harmful bacteria. Lesser, but still significant, problems cited by the report include inadequately treated municipal wastewater and combined sewer overflows.

Public comments on the report are important because a water quality restoration plan is community driven, relying on local officials, watershed groups and landowners to implement many strategies for improving their watershed. The Portage River Basin Council and the Sugar Creek Protection Society are two groups focused on improving water quality in the watershed.

The report suggests a number of actions that can improve water quality.

- Ohio EPA will consider additional regulatory limits on wastewater discharges from municipal wastewater plants.
- Ohio EPA urges county health departments to inspect private septic systems and work with home owners to repair or replace failing systems.
- The agricultural community can take steps to implement practices that reduce sediment and nutrient runoff and channel erosion.

Ohio is required by the federal Clean Water Act to identify waters that do not meet water quality standards and develop methods to bring the affected waters into compliance. This is known as the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program, which estimates the maximum amount of pollutants a water body can receive on a daily basis without violating water quality standards. The TMDL program can improve the quality of a stream by taking a comprehensive look at all pollution sources. This includes point sources such as wastewater treatment plants and industrial facilities, as well as nonpoint sources, including runoff from urban and agricultural areas.

The Portage River watershed drains all or parts of Wood, Hancock, Ottawa, Sandusky and Seneca counties along its route to Lake Erie. Major Portage River tributaries include the North, Middle, South and East branches of the river, Needles Creek, Rader Creek, Bull Creek, Rocky Ford, Sugar Creek, Wolf Creek and the Little Portage River. Streams in the watershed supply drinking water for the communities of Fostoria, North Baltimore and McComb.

Anyone wishing to submit comments on the draft report for Ohio EPA's consideration may do so in writing to Katie McKibben, Ohio EPA Northwest District Office, 347 N. Dunbridge Road, Bowling Green, OH 43402, or by e-mail to katie.mckibben@epa.state.oh.us by the close of business on August 15, 2011. Comments received after this date may be considered as time permits. After consideration of comments, Ohio EPA will submit the document to U.S. EPA for approval.