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Ohio EPA Reports Results of Water Quality in Licking River Watershed: Biology Remains Very Good, Investments Have Paid Off

Fish and aquatic species are thriving at 40 Licking River watershed sites evaluated by Ohio EPA, according to exceptional biological results recorded in a recently published water quality [study](#).

Ohio EPA set out in 2008 to evaluate the aquatic life use potential of the Licking River and tributaries such as North and South Fork Licking River, Rocky Fork and Raccoon Creek. The Agency sampled 90 sites across the 779-square-mile watershed in parts of Licking, Muskingum, Knox and Fairfield counties.

Six of seven Licking River sites and 73 of 83 tributary sites (88 percent) fully met the goals of the Clean Water Act for aquatic life. Biological results have remained very good since Ohio EPA's 1993 watershed [survey](#), despite significant population growth and additional potential pollution sources. Watershed-wide investments, including upgrades to wastewater treatment plants that discharge to the river or streams, appear to have helped protect and maintain water quality.

Ohio EPA also studied the ability of certain streams to provide safe drinking water and recreational opportunities. The North Fork, from which Newark obtains its drinking water, fully met its goals for public drinking water supply use. The lower North Fork, Licking River and majority of larger streams in the watershed also met their recreation use goals. However, most smaller streams in the watershed were impaired by bacteria which can impact public health and recreational enjoyment.

Ohio EPA also found Dillon Lake was affected by nutrient enrichment. Other impacts include sediment accumulation in the lake from stream bank erosion upstream. Downstream of the dam, the lake was found to impair aquatic life in the Licking River due to chronically low dissolved oxygen levels and elevated ammonia concentrations.

Regularly inspecting and repairing (or replacing, if need be) home sewage treatment systems and employing agricultural best management practices (e.g., fencing livestock off from streams) can reduce the amount of bacteria in streams and improve recreation in the watershed. These and other improvements, like storm water controls to manage runoff, often depend on the voluntary cooperation of local residents and land owners. To limit water pollution, Ohio EPA regulates sources such as wastewater treatment plants while local health departments inspect home septic systems.

Ohio EPA's Licking River study was the first step toward developing a watershed restoration report, known as a [Total Maximum Daily Load \(TMDL\)](#) report. Once completed, that report will be available for public comment. The report is designed to help address impairments. The federal Clean Water Act requires Ohio to identify streams that do not meet water quality standards and determine what is needed to bring the affected waters into compliance. The TMDL process generally determines the maximum load or amount of pollutants a water body can receive on a daily basis without violating water quality standards. Water quality standards are based on designated uses that reflect the water's potential to be used by people and support a healthy biological community. Studies can take several years to complete.

To monitor and report on the quality of streams throughout the state, Ohio EPA employees collect chemical, physical and biological samples from dozens of sites in each study area. Ohio EPA analyzes information about the abundance and variety of fish and aquatic insects, especially those species sensitive to pollution, and the amount of bacteria, metals and nutrients in the stream system. The Agency has one of the most advanced water quality monitoring programs in the nation, determining the health of rivers and streams by sampling the biology and habitat in addition to water chemistry. Biology and habitat information can be used to show long-term trends in the quality of the water resource.

Local governments, groups and citizens can use Ohio EPA's information to develop plans to maintain and/or restore impaired waterways. Stakeholders also can request [grants](#) and additional assistance from Ohio EPA and other funding sources for projects that alleviate water quality problems and protect the resource for recreational enjoyment.

Other material related to the Licking River watershed study is [online](#) and also available for review by calling Ohio EPA's Division of Surface Water, Central District Office, at (614) 728-3778.

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