

Reporting Water Pollution

Additional Information for Citizens

Although much has been done on the Detroit River over the past 30 years to address the issues of pollution on our river, there is still much that can be done. Even though levels of toxin such as PCB's, Dioxins and Mercury have dropped dramatically over this time period, levels in the environment are still high enough to require fish advisories on a number of game fish in the river. Some areas are so impacted by historical contaminant loadings that many of the bottom dwelling organisms have ceased to exist.

Historically contaminated sediment can account for some of this problem, but current loading from various sources is also a major concern. Such things as effluent from waste treatment facilities, surface run-off to our storm drain systems, waste streams from industrial concerns, non-point source ground contamination seepage, illicit discharges (dumping of waste into storm drains) and spills account for a large part of our current water quality and environmental problems.

Federal and State budgetary cuts have greatly reduced the amount of money that is currently available to observe, monitor and regulate these problems. Public participation can help in filling this void by the use of simple observation techniques to observe and report on unusual occurrences or suspicious activities along our river system.

Michigan is fortunate that it has a wealth of potential volunteers. Recreational boaters, fisherman, hunters, canoeist, kayakers, riverside residents and those who frequent the river's shores can all be "River Watch" volunteers.

What are considered signs of a pollution problem?

Some problems are more obvious than others. Oil slicks, floating sewage debris, dead fish and unusual or unnatural water discolorations or smells are all indications of pollution problems. In the past the Detroit River has been witness to a number of these incidents, although not as frequent, the recent large oil spill in May of 2002, only emphasizes the fact that there is still a need for close monitoring and observation of critical areas around the river. Early detection, proper reporting and a quick response from the proper authorities could prevent a small incident from becoming a major environmental catastrophe.

Under the Federal Clean Water Act of 1972, the EPA established a set of criterion to judge reportable water quality problems. These criteria are also included in the NPDES (National Pollution Discharge Elimination System) permits that are issued to any entity that discharges waste water into the river or it's connecting waterways. These criteria have also been adopted into our State's Water Quality Standards and the

state has been given the authority by the Federal Government to regulate and enforce these permits and standards.

Other less visible substances such as some toxin compounds and heavy metals may not be as visible, especially those which are water-soluble. These require scientific sampling and analysis to determine their presence.

What are these criteria and what should observers look for?

According to The State Of Michigan's Water Quality Standards, the waters of the state shall not have any of the following unnatural physical properties in quantities which are or may become injurious to any designated use, such as; unnatural turbidity, color, oil film, floating solids, foam, settleable solids or deposits as a result of this discharge. State NPDES permits require that permit holder discharges do not have any of the above listed characteristics and further state that the observance of any of these unusual characteristics in their discharges should be reported to the State within 24hrs.

What constitutes a reportable incident or violation and who should be contacted?

Some incidents such as oil spills, oil films or chemical sheens on the water are regulated under the U.S. Coast Guards oil discharge regulations. Whether it originates from a moving vessel, a discharge pipe or from an on land spill the Coast Guard will respond to these types of occurrences.

Incidents involving a perceived violation of the State's water quality standards should be directed to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality's Southeast Surface Water Quality Division. They are entrusted to look into potential permit violations.

Wayne County's Department Of Environment will respond to a number of environmental issues within the County's jurisdiction. Some of these problems include: illegal dumping, industrial sewage, soil runoff from construction sites water pollution and water quality related complaints.

In the City of Detroit, incidents that involve any kind of illegal dumping should be directed to the City of Detroit.

What information should be provided when making a report?

Having the proper information at hand before making a report will aid the reporting agency in accurately assessing the situation and thus providing that the proper response occurs in the shortest amount of time. Knowing the date, time and exact location of the incident is essential. If the incident is being observed from the water or near shore, then the name of the nearest large facility, street end, or landmark is helpful. A GPS coordinate, if obtainable, is also an excellent locating method, especially

when off shore. Other off shore locators that can be used is citing the proximity to any of the islands or channel markers that are found along the length of the River. On shore observations allow for the use of specific address to pinpoint locations. The documentation of a vehicle license plate number or company name, in the event of the observation of illegal dumping of waste materials into a storm drain by a waste hauler, will provide necessary information for investigative follow-up.

Type and nature of the problem is extremely important. Is it a discoloration of the water, an odor, or an oil slick, dead or effected fish or waterfowl, if so how many. Is it coming from a discernable source, such as a point on shore or a particular discharge or does it appear to be coming from a undetermined up stream location. What is the size of the problem. Is it confined to a small location or is covering a large area. Most importantly take pictures or video whenever possible to document the problem.

Safety and legal Considerations

When making observation of possible pollution incidents it is important to keep in mind safety and legal consideration while in the process of gathering information. It is advisable to keep a safe distance from any unknown substance. Do not attempt to gather physical samples, but instead take pictures whenever possible. Do not trespass on private property without permission. Most incidents can be readily observed from the water where trespassing will not be an issue.

By keeping an eye out for potential pollution problems, while enjoying the resources of the Detroit River, you can help reduce and minimize the effects that spills and illicit discharges are having on the ecology of the river. Prompt and accurate reporting of these problems to the proper authorities will make a difference.

Contact Numbers

U S Coast Guard's National Response Center 1-800-424-8802

MDEQ Pollution Emergency Alert System 1-800-292-4706

Wayne County Department of the Environment Hotline 1-888-223-2363

City of Detroit 1-800-471-5100

Riverkeeper 1-734.676-4626