

A YEAR OR SO IN REVIEW AND A YEAR OR SO LOOKING FORWARD - 6-4-2018

William W. Wright, Partnership Chair

This year, I've arranged items by topic, with the views forward and/or back close together.

Beach Closings BUI

Over the last year, the Partnership finalized draft Removal Criteria for the Beach Closings BUI. These have now been approved by Office of the Great Lakes. They will continue through the review process at the Environmental Protection Agency and the International Joint Commission for adoption as the official "yardstick" by which progress toward removal of the Beach Closings BUI in Saginaw Bay will be measured and the conditions that must be achieved for removal to happen.

The task force members who have worked on these criteria have a vision for how we'd like to see violations of Michigan's Water Quality Standards addressed at 6 targeted beaches that currently have the worst E. coli contamination. This includes: Source tracking to characterize contamination as human, bovine or, perhaps, avian; Sampling/monitoring of drain and stream outlets that may be suspected of impacting target beaches; When streams are found to have E. Coli contamination, review upstream land uses and/or land management practices that may contribute to contamination; Contact potentially relevant landowners, via regulatory or non-regulatory channels, to note suspected problem(s) and discuss possible solutions (May need to "bring money to the table."); and Conduct ongoing monitoring of beaches to document trends toward attainment of BUI removal criteria.

Our partners do not seem to share our vision, denying requests for funding to do source tracking, or not processing previous samples for source tracking information. Perhaps, we need to clearly articulate our vision as a draft plan of action, and engage partners for their input and, hopefully, buy-in for such a plan. We have neither the technical capability nor the jurisdiction to accomplish these things by ourselves. We must rely on partners to perform work in the field. Enforcement actions, if necessary, need to be done by agencies having jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) has engaged Public Sector Consultants for a study of the impact of failing septic systems in 5 counties adjacent to Saginaw Bay. This effort includes several Partnership members and addresses the suspicion that failing septic systems may be a primary cause of current beach contamination issues. This study will be ongoing during the coming year. Partnership members will have opportunities to interface its findings and recommendations with our ongoing Beach Closings BUI work. This study follows other efforts to create a septic system review and enforcement mechanism, regionally and statewide. Shiawassee County has adopted such a system. Their experience may be helpful, if current opposition to such regulation is to be overcome.

Eutrophication

The Partnership has included the beginning of a multi-year review of the Eutrophication BUI in its most recent request for Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funds. Several BUIs appear to be impacted by excess nutrients in Saginaw Bay. These are: Degradation of Benthos; Eutrophication or Undesirable Algae; Degradation of Aesthetics; and Degradation of Phyto- or Zooplankton Populations. Michigan's Water Strategy prioritizes actions to address eutrophication in the Western Lake Erie basin. We may wish to monitor that activity for some guidance in Saginaw Bay efforts.

State of the Bay Conference

In 2017, the Partnership participated in the first State of the Bay Conference, sponsored by the Cook Family Foundation and organized by Saginaw Bay WIN. Since then, several parties, including the Partnership, are working to repeat this event every other year. Several Partnership members also are working with WIN, MDEQ and Saginaw Valley State University's Saginaw Bay Environmental Science Institute to develop workshops, focusing on the latest research, during the years between State of the Bay conferences, perhaps generating program material for the next conference.

From Newsletter to web postings

The budget for the Partnership's current Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grant does not mention a "newsletter." This was a departure from previous efforts which began with printed documents that were mailed to a list of interested people from around the watershed. That format changed a few years ago to an e-newsletter, distributed electronically to a somewhat larger list. Meanwhile, the Partnership's website continually grew into a larger collection of information and links to partner organizations that were working to improve conditions in Saginaw Bay.

During the past year, as the Partnership has developed new material, this was added to the website, and new links were directed to complementary material on other sites. People on the distribution list for Board meeting packets continue to get monthly updates via the agendas and related attachments, many of which also get posted on the website.

For next year, we'll explore adding the website address and other contact information to the format of meeting material to remind readers of multiple opportunities for contact and involvement.

GLRI – and Survival

Federal funding from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has supplied over 90% of the Partnership's budget for several years, but the present Administration has twice attempted to end the GLRI. The Congressional delegation from Great Lakes states restored funding for this year, and they are working to do so for next year. However, there are no guarantees.

If GLRI funding ends, the Partnership has few options to consider for continuing its current efforts.

First, the Partnership could seek other grants. The Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) has funded some landmark studies developed for the Partnership in the past. Generally, WIN grants have not included funds for ongoing Partnership administration. For some State or federal grants, applicants may include a budget line for "indirect" costs. If received, this could help to sustain the Partnership.

Second, the Partnership could re-establish a requirement for members to pay dues. Previously, dues did not generate enough to sustain the organization's administrative effort. Further, a dues requirement would be contrary to our efforts to involve as many people as we can. Currently, no Public Advisory Councils in Michigan charge dues.

Third, the Partnership could seek contributions from individuals, businesses or non-profit organizations to support our ongoing administrative costs. Starting from scratch, this would be a long shot to generate the \$15,000 - \$20,000 per year that we've worked with lately. Given our current portfolio, and

the tendency of many watershed residents not to place much value in Saginaw Bay, asking for a contribution to maintain the Partnership would be a “hard sell.”

Fourth, contributions could be supplemented by annual distributions (currently in the \$500 to \$1,000 range) from the Partnership’s Endowment Fund at the Saginaw Community Foundation.

Who are we, and what are we doing here?

While we still have the blessing of GLRI funds, it may help to clearly define our role in the AOC process. Public Advisory Councils are mentioned in the Office of the Great Lakes website, but their role is not described much. As we’ve considered the Beach Closings BUI, our lack of “standing” has made us less likely to receive available data. Requests for funding to conduct source control sampling have been denied repeatedly.

Although we’ve approached AOC issues as if we have some “say” in discussions, it appears that we do not. A clear definition of our role could save needless frustration. What is expected of us? How shall we produce that?

Meanwhile, let’s generate all the good that we can with our current GLRI grant.