

Cities Lag in Treatment Plants

Great Lakes Still Have Problems

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MILWAUKEE — The Great Lakes, North America's largest freshwater reservoir and the cradle of America's industrial revolution, are slowly recovering from decades of environmental abuse.

But while industries and cities have spent billions cleaning up the chemical and sewage wastes they pour into the lakes, enormous problems remain. Fish are poisoned by mercury, pesticides, PCB's and other dangerous chemicals. Drinking water in Lake Superior contains asbestos, a possible cancer-causing agent. Some beaches are closed because of sewage bacteria.

"In five years, we've come a long way toward cleaning up the Great Lakes," said Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Russell E. Train after a four-day trip around the lakes.

"Tremendous resources are being brought to bear, and there are real success stories. But it is a very mixed picture. You can't cure the ills of 100 years overnight."

TEN YEARS AGO, NEWSPAPER headlines across the country decried

the "death" of Lake Erie, and the lake became a national symbol of environmental destruction, sparking the fledgling ecology movement.

The lake, a 12,000-year-old inland sea, suffered from a premature aging process called "eutrophication" which threatened to turn it into a swamp.

Cities around the lake, such as Cleveland, Detroit and Buffalo, were pouring untreated sewage and phosphorous into its waters. Phosphorous, a pervasive nutrient contained in food, household detergents and fertilizers, stimulates underwater plant growth — which in turn depletes oxygen necessary for fish to survive.

Today, the dead, oxygen-depleted area which once covered 60 per cent of the lake bottom has begun to recede. However, Lake Ontario also is suffering from eutrophication, and has not improved since 1967.

IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS, THE United States has undertaken one of the largest public works projects in its history to build sewage treatment plants around the nation. Of the \$18 billion allocated, about \$5 billion is to be spent in the Great Lakes region by September 1977.

Today about 60 per cent of the sewage produced by Americans living along the lakes receives adequate treatment. On the Canadian side, 97 per cent of the population is served by modern treatment plants.

The lag, produced in part by federal grant red tape, by local contractor bidding squabbles and the cities' financial problems, has produced some tension between Canada and the United States. The two countries signed a treaty in 1972 pledging a joint cleanup by 1975.

Under the 1972 amendments to the Federal Water Pollution Control Act, EPA has authority to grant money for sewer plants and to require industry to restrict discharges.

In 1972, it was thought that new sewage plants could clean up the phosphorous that was killing the lakes — although environmentalists said a total ban on phosphates in detergents was needed.

Last week, Train said the treatment approach has failed. "Even as we get our sewage treatment plants on line, we're finding they don't give us adequate phosphate reduction," he said.

"I DON'T SEE ANY ANSWER TO the problem short of a severe limitation on phosphate detergents in the Great Lakes area." He said EPA will encourage states around the lakes to enact restrictions — so far, only Indiana, New York and Minnesota have strict phosphate laws.

Although adequate sewage treatment facilities in Great Lakes cities will not be ready until 1981 at the earliest, industry is well on its way to complying with clean water regulations by next year.

As a tribute to industries' efforts, Train donned a hard hat to tour Monsanto Co.'s phosphates plant in Tren-

ton, Mich., and Republic Steel's giant Cleveland mill.

Monsanto's products appear in such familiar items as Coca-Cola, Kent cigarettes, Colgate toothpaste and Tide detergent. In the late 1960s the plant, the largest phosphate operation in the world, was dumping 5,000 pounds of phosphate wastes a day into the Detroit River. Today, after \$750,000 worth of in-plant treatment facilities, the discharge is 30 pounds a day.

Republic's largest steel mill until recently discharged oil, iron, zinc, phenol, ammonia and cyanide in 70 million gallons of water a day. A few years ago, the Cuyahoga River, which empties into Lake Erie, became so dirty from steel and chemical companies' discharges that it caught fire.

Today, Republic has spent \$55 million

for water treatment facilities and tests show its discharges are cleaner than the river water it takes in.

WHILE MOST OF THE 400 INDUSTRIAL discharges along the Great Lakes have agreed, often reluctantly, to comply with the water pollution control laws, 17 plants, including four owned by U.S. Steel, are fighting EPA in court.

Republic Steel and Armco, owners of Reserve Mining in Silver Bay, Minn., are locked in combat with the federal government over the company's pollution of Lake Superior. Reserve has discharged 67,000 tons of taconite tailings daily for 21 years, contaminating the drinking water of Duluth with asbestos fibers, a possible carcinogen (cancer-causing agent).

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