

State Water Quality Better

Overall water quality in Wisconsin is improving gradually, and rapid improvement is likely within the next decade, as new federal and state programs begin to take effect.

That is the basic message in a 308-page "Annual Water Quality Report to Congress" recently published by the Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR).

The document is available to the public at DNR district offices in Madison, Milwaukee, Green Bay, Rhinelander, Spooner and Eau Claire and in the document section of 84 public libraries throughout the state.

The report contains the latest and most detailed information obtainable on Wisconsin water quality and pollution control. Included are accounts of progress to date, analysis of problems yet to be solved and a wealth of data collected from the state's lakes and streams.

The report points out, for instance, that, of Wisconsin's 3,380 miles of major rivers, all but 305 miles already meet national water quality standards that must be attained by 1983 and that, of the 703 major industrial wastewater dischargers in the state, 411 appear to be meeting effluent limitations set for 1977. Financial projections show that municipalities will be spending \$681-million sewage treatment plant construction between now and 1980 and that the pulp and paper industry alone will be spending \$153-million on pollution control during the same period.

However, other sections of the report make it clear that a lot of work remains to be done:

- ✓ Polluted runoff from farms and cities is a problem which is becoming more obvious as industrial and municipal discharges are cleaned up. The State Board of Soil and Water Conservation Districts estimates that 7.3 million of Wisconsin's
- ✓ Cleaning up the discharges from municipal sewage treatment plant is likely to be as difficult and expensive as industrial pollution control. So far, Wisconsin has kept ahead of most other states in this field. All sanitary sewers in the state lead

to some kind of treatment plant, and 98 percent of the sewerage population is served by secondary treatment. But as the public demand for clean water increases and water quality standards get tougher, the treatment plant need frequent modernization.

Of the state's 550 treatment plants that discharge to surface waters, 212 have been improved or rebuilt during the last five years, and 99 now meet the requirements of 1977 state and federal effluent limits. Even so, more than 500 of the plants are on the waiting list for federal grants. 12.2 million acres of cropland have dominant erosion problems which contribute silt and fertilizer to streams; urban stormwater also enters streams after every rain, carrying with it pollutants washed off lawns, streets and construction sites. A number of studies and demonstration projects are being carried out to define the techniques for controlling this kind of pollution, but its abatement is many years and dollars away.

- ✓ Trace amounts of toxic chemicals in fish still are a problem, and no sooner are some of these substances brought under control than others arise to take their place. For example, since the statewide ban on DDT use, concentrations of the pesticide in Lake Michigan fish have been declining. But recently, high concentrations of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, have been noted in fish from Lake Michigan, Lake Pepin and part of the upper Fox River. Rules are being drafted to control the use and discharge of PCBs in Wisconsin.

which will be used for further improvement, and at least \$1-billion will have to be spent to bring these plants and their sewer systems up to anticipated 1990 treatment needs.

Most readers of the report probably will pick up its most significant message "between the lines": The fact that engineering, dollars and law enforcement alone will not be able to provide us the clean water we need. In addition to that effort, traditional attitudes toward the uses of water, and the costs of those uses, will have to be altered if we are to reach our clean water goals and avoid extending the problems of the past into the future.

Today's pollution abatement programs are expensive and difficult because they are an attempt to correct a century of abuse within a few decades. In the past, the environmental costs of urban development, industrial growth and agricultural expansion were not paid, or even considered in planning, because the market system could not account for them. Pollution, erosion, toxic chemicals and other "external"

costs of growth simply were passed along to the environment and to the future. But now that the environment's capacity for waste assimilation has been taxed to the limit in many places, it is up to us to pay the due bills.

The state and federal water pollution control statutes passed in the early '70s mandate the preservation of biological integrity and aesthetic quality in our waters. That means that, from now on, the environment costs of our activities must be paid as they are incurred, in the form of better waste treatment, alternate methods of waste disposal and changed resource consumption habits. In the future, all water use will have to be on a "pay as you go" basis.

So a final analysis of the "Annual Water Quality Report to Congress" could be something like this: Wisconsin is making steady progress using technology and money to manage our water quality problems — but a final solution for these problems will depend on our acceptance of higher costs, self-discipline and conservation in our uses of water.

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