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Collaboration is Key to Improve Water Quality in Lake Erie

By Rep. Dan Moul (R-Adams)

The Great Lakes contain about 84% of North America's fresh surface water and about 21% worldwide, but this precious source of fresh water is under threat.

You may wonder why a state representative from Adams County would be concerned about problems in the Great Lakes, but earlier this fall, Rep. Mark Keller (R-Perry) and I were appointed by House Speaker Mike Turzai to represent Pennsylvania at the Great Lakes – St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus, Patricia Birkholz Institute for Great Lakes – St. Lawrence Policy.

The institute is a binational, nonpartisan organization of state legislators in the Great Lakes region, whose sole purpose is to establish policy concerning the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River. I was selected to represent Pennsylvania because of my legislative work and interest in stormwater issues in Pennsylvania, and Rep. Keller for his knowledge and experience in agriculture.

Together with Keller, water quality experts and our counterparts from Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, New York, and the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, we gathered recently for a three-day conference in Detroit where we set out to study nutrient pollution and find solutions to problems common to the Great Lakes.

We compared our knowledge and experience concerning nutrient pollution and sought to identify where it exists and to what degree, and to determine its causes and impact on water quality, residents, businesses and industries.

We learned that agricultural runoff from farms and along streams in the Great Lakes region are largely responsible for the delivery of phosphorus to the lakes, despite efforts to control it. Phosphorus feeds the over production of algae in the lakes, which in significant levels can produce dead zones that choke off oxygen to fish. Toxic algae can also be deadly to livestock and other animals, and harmful to humans.

Of the five Great Lakes, Pennsylvania's Lake Erie is the most polluted. It has the highest concentration of phosphorus, the largest number of dead zones, and the discovery of E. coli from sewage contamination and microcystin toxicity from algae blooms has raised public health concerns prompting beach closings at the popular Presque Isle State Park.

While the algae blooms are not generally life threatening to humans, ingestion of the water can cause gastrointestinal symptoms and sickness. Worse yet, swimming in the affected water can cause a skin rash, irritated eyes and nose and a cough or sore throat. “Swimmer’s Itch” is another condition common in freshwater lakes. Caused by a parasite, it produces red spots on the body that cause a nearly insane level of itchiness. Those affected by it can apply over-the-counter anti-itch remedies, but the outbreak must run its course — lasting several days.

In 2017, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) developed a Lake Erie phosphorus reduction action plan, which is included in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) 2018-2023 Action Plan for Lake Erie. While the DEP acknowledges that harmful algae blooms are prevalent in Lake Erie’s western basin and low oxygen conditions exist in the central basin, it says Pennsylvania contributes a very small percentage of the overall phosphorus responsible.

According to DEP, these problems are “driven by agricultural nonpoint source runoff in Western Basin tributaries, chief among them the Maumee River watershed entering Lake Erie by Toledo, Ohio. Other sources include point source discharges and combined sewer overflows from municipal sewage treatment plants, urban storm water runoff, and loading coming directly from Lake Huron.”

Clearly, collaboration is needed among our Great Lakes partners to improve water quality in Lake Erie. The DEP has no plans for major phosphorus reductions at this time. However, monitoring and reporting will continue.

Over the course of our three days in Detroit, our group learned about the sources and effects of nutrient pollution and the necessity of implementing evidence-based best practices to control it. Based on our findings, we began drafting a position statement and action plan outlining specific strategies member states and provinces can take in collaboration to reduce nutrient pollution in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River.

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