

DNR labels portion of Rock River impaired

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By Carrie Michael/The Janesville Gazette Staff

Problems responsible for putting the Rock River on a list of impaired rivers haven't affected two of the creeks that feed into it.

The Rock River, from two miles south of Indianford to Beloit, is ranked as one of the impaired rivers in Wisconsin, the Department of Natural Resources said Thursday in a new five-year report.

But Turtle Creek and Bass Creek are ranked as exceptional waters in Wisconsin.

The DNR used a new format for sharing information with the public by conducting an open house in Lake Mills on Thursday. Fifty people gathered to hear the DNR's State of the Rock River Basin Report.

The basin covers 3,800 square miles and includes the cities of Janesville, Beloit, Fort Atkinson, Madison, Beaver Dam, Oconomowoc and Watertown.

The lack of encroachment on the shorelines makes Bass Creek--which runs from Footville to Afton--and Turtle Creek--which goes from Delavan to south of Beloit--so healthy, said Ruth Johnson, DNR basin planner.

"Usually the ones that are in good shape have very little farming up to the edge and darn good buffers," she said.

The Rock River from Lake Koshkonong to Indianford is in the clear and doesn't have an impaired ranking.

Things get messy where the Yahara River meets the Rock. The Yahara connects lakes Monona and Mendota in Madison and flows into the Rock near Gibbs Lake and Stone Farm roads.

Good things in the basin include local programs, zoning laws and growth plans that increasingly have embraced conservation in the past five years, Johnson said.

Bad things include steady runoff pollution into surface water and increasing nitrate pollution in ground water.

"We are an agricultural powerhouse," Johnson said of the basin.

A recent DNR study showed urban, construction site and farm runoff caused 59 percent of surface water pollution. Wastewater treatment plants and industry caused the other 41 percent.

Below the surface, nitrates are the pollution players.

Fertilizers, septic systems and decaying plants create nitrates. Too many of them spells trouble.

Eighteen percent of ground water wells in the basin exceed state and federal limits for nitrate levels, Johnson said.

In Rock County, 25 percent to 30 percent of wells exceed legal nitrate levels, said Tim Banwell, environmental health director for the Rock County Health Department.

Elevated nitrate levels in ground water, which is drinking water, pose a risk to pregnant women and infants less than 6 months old, Banwell said.

Nitrates bind with hemoglobin and prevent blood from transferring oxygen to body tissues, he said.

Rock County's main source of nitrate pollution comes from improper use of agricultural fertilizers, Banwell said.

Experts clarified their points about agriculture's role in water pollution in the basin.

"I hesitate to point the finger at farmers," said Ken Johnson, DNR Lower Rock River Basin team leader. "It's farms that are not managed properly."

He would rather see land used properly for agriculture than for residences because the impact is lower on natural resources.

"We're not trying to prohibit the application of manure," Ken Johnson said.

Farmers need to apply manure in a fashion that's consistent with the plants' level of uptake to reduce runoff, he said.

The key in using manure as a fertilizer is how and when farmers apply it to fields, he said.

Residents at the meeting said they attended because they were curious.

The only Janesville resident at the meeting was Joel Shapiro, vice president of the Rock Aqua Jays water ski team.

The team's concerns are with responsible boating, the future of the dams, river and shoreline pollution, and access to the river, Shapiro said. He came to see how the team can help and how it fits into the DNR's plans for the basin.

Bob Crump, a Lake Mills Township resident, said he liked this format over other DNR public meetings.

"This is more informal, and you get more of an interchange here," Crump said. "It's a very large change in the amount of cooperation."

The basin report will be finalized in June, so the department is seeking public input now and not at the end of the process, Ruth Johnson said.

The agency now combines the elements of land, air, water and wildlife into one report.

"The left hand and the right hand of the department know what's going on, and they're pulling in the same direction," Ken Johnson said.