

We All Want the Same Thing: Clean Fresh Water

By: Jim Nash
Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner

I would like to commend The Detroit Free Press and its editorial staff for tackling a complex and often esoteric topic in its series of articles involving water quality in and around Lake St. Clair. This is a daunting task especially when it appears that there are competing factions with differing claims and approaches. Before I address those different constituencies, I think it is important to emphasize that we all want the same thing – clean, fresh water.

As the Oakland County Water Resources Commissioner, it is my responsibility to preserve and protect this most valuable resource. I take that responsibility seriously and am doing my part in ensuring that the facilities under my authority are operating as designed to protect the water quality in our lakes, rivers and streams.

I recognize that effectively addressing water quality demands a tremendous amount of money. Oakland County has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to treat combined sewer overflows or CSOs. That includes \$144 million to increase the capacity of the George W. Kuhn (GWK) Retention Treatment Facility in Madison Heights, to its current capacity of about 124 million gallons. This project was the largest of its kind in North America.

Samples from this facility routinely confirm that our treatment and disinfection process, involving screening and settling solids and mixing in up to 160,000 gallons of chlorine to sanitize the water passing through, is effective. Also, while it is true that the GWK has treated and released permitted discharge flows into the Red Run subwatershed, those events account for less than one one hundredth of one percent (<0.01%) of the total flow (38 square miles) compared to the untreated flow from 228,194 square miles from the Red Run Subwatershed, the Clinton River Watershed, the St. Clair River and the Lake St. Clair Regional sub-basin drainage area which includes Canada. Except for the GWK and four Macomb County CSO facilities, these flows contain untreated stormwater, carrying pollutants from animal droppings and nutrients, as well as failed septic systems and illicit sanitary sewer discharges. In fact, a state toxicologist recently confirmed that

there is no correlation between the George W. Kuhn Retention Treatment Facility and the impact of algae and bacteria on Macomb County beaches.

I am well aware that there are those who believe we are not doing enough. While I find no fault with their passion, I am confident, and the evidence confirms, that my staff and I are leading the way to ensure our water quality is protected and steps are taken to preserve the future health of our region's water. I am convinced that it is important for regional leaders to commit to aligning our investments to best serve the public interest.

I also want to reiterate that there are extensive regional efforts currently underway to address water quality throughout southeast Michigan. For example, Oakland County has contributed significant resources while working closely with the Great Lakes Water Authority on its master planning effort to address water quality.

As an environmentalist and elected public official, I've been working on water quality issues for years. So, since becoming water resources commissioner, I have assembled a group of influential leaders, stakeholders and elected officials who meet on an annual basis to find the best ways to address water quality issues in our region. This year's event, the fifth annual Regional Stormwater Summit at Lawrence Technological University will be on October 20. As a report developed by experts under my direction explains, the negative impacts of stormwater flow must be considered in any regional water quality plan (available at oakgov.com/water).

I am proud of this facility and the conscientious and capable men and women on my staff who do their part to protect water quality. I welcome constructive discussions and will continue to support regional efforts that lead to continuing progress to improve water quality through sensible and cost-effective measures.

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