

Commentary: We're tired of getting dumped on

Lake Pepin is getting dumped on - to the tune of a cubic city block of sediment a year, close to 1 million metric tons.

Have you noticed? We have. Up in Wacouta Bay, close to where we live, the lake has gotten so shallow that boaters can no longer zip over to Bay City — the water is too shallow. Hardly any rooted plants grow any more — there's too much mud in the water to let the sun shine through to the bottom.

Experts say the lake is filling with sediment at 10 times the natural rate. That means that if nothing is done, the upper third of the lake will disappear by the time this century is out, and the entire lake will become a marsh with a navigation ditch down the middle within 300 years.

Meanwhile, the Mississippi River, between Lake Pepin and Ft. Snelling, is becoming so choked with sediment that it's a virtual desert with respect to healthy plant life, compared to the lush vegetation found in the clear water downstream of the lake.

The good news is the beginning of an action plan to reverse this process is taking shape.

The state of Minnesota has sponsored research showing where the sediment is coming from - the fields, ravines and river bluffs of the Minnesota River, Cannon River and Crow River. It's coming from intensely farmed — and artificially drained — watersheds.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is setting a water quality standard specifically designed to bring the south metro Mississippi River back to life, with respect to aquatic vegetation. (It's already a pretty good fishery, thanks to wastewater treatment improvements.) The new standard will set a maximum level for total suspended solids in the water.

Once this water quality standard is put in place, the MPCA will move to complete a Total Maximum Daily Load report to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This report will specify a maximum allowable load of sediment for the Mississippi River, and allocate this load to the various tributaries upstream of the metro area.

We who live on or near Lake Pepin need to make sure these measures move forward, and that they lead to action. If successful, these measures would clean up the Mississippi and double the expected life of Lake Pepin.

The Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance was formed a year and half ago, as an ad hoc citizens group, to provide a way for local residents on both sides of the lake to support needed policies and actions to clean up the Mississippi and save Lake Pepin from premature death.

Please join us Feb. 23 from 2 to 7 p.m. at the St. James Hotel, where the LPLA is co-sponsoring an open house on the proposed new MPCA standards with MPCA.

You also are invited to get on our mailing list to keep abreast of coming opportunities to make a difference.

The task before us is hugely challenging - but the opportunity to chart a course for improvement has never been better. Please don't miss this chance. Contact us at www.lakepepinlegacyalliance.org.

Mike McKay is executive director of the Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance.