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Allegan County Addresses Waterway Pollution Concerns

(Allegan, MI)— In recent weeks, the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) has received many National Response Center complaints on observed Kalamazoo River pollution. The Allegan County Health Department (ACHD) has been working with EGLE to address these concerns. While we do not want to undermine resident's concerns of Allegan County waterways, misinformation is also spreading. In effort to address the misinformation, below is educational information on various environmental health topics.

Waterways

The environment around a river or other waterway influences the color of the water. Factors such as minerals, soil runoff and sediment, and algae can cause water to differ from its natural presentation of blue. Iron, manganese, and calcium carbonate from limestone all common minerals that can cause water to range in color from red and orange to green and blue. Sediment and soil runoff also can change water's color, depending on how much sediment the river carries or heavy rainfall. Erosion or wearing away from riverbanks brings soil into the river, changing the color. After heavy storms, many rivers run brown from all the runoff flowing into the river. Clay can cause rivers to be murky white, muddy brown, or yellow.

Algal blooms are natural occurring overgrowths of algae caused by sunlight, slow water, or nutrients. Pollution runoff from humans can also increase nutrients in the water and cause an algal bloom. Algae can affect the health and color of the water. The color caused by algae can range from a dark green to almost a reddish color. Algae eat nutrients from the water along with dissolved oxygen causing harmful effects on the ecosystem of a river or waterway.

E.coli

Escherichia coli (*E.coli*) is a coliform bacterium that occurs naturally in waterways from fish and other wildlife. If there is also a heavy rainfall, additional *E.coli* from agricultural runoff, pet manure, wastewater treatment plants and on-site

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septic systems can also washed into waterways. When *E. coli* exceeds the accepted level in recreational water, it results in an increased risk of human illness. Diseases acquired from contact with contaminated water can cause gastrointestinal illness, skin, ear, respiratory, eye, neurologic, and wound infections. The most commonly reported symptoms are stomach cramps, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, and low-grade fever.

It is important to note that when waterways warm up, more bacteria grows. This is why in the summer months, and during times with excessive heat, more individuals are at risk of illness.

Since January 2017, only one *E. coli* case investigation has mentioned an Allegan County waterway as a potential source of exposure.

Over the last five years, Allegan County took weekly water samples at six Lake Michigan beaches (Oval, Pier Cove, Westside, Douglas, Laketown and Saugatuck Dunes) during the summer months. From 2014-2018, there were about seven samples out of the 480 samples collected with *E. coli* above acceptable levels. After reviewing this data and lack of enough funding to support this sampling, we decided to stop testing because it was not protecting public health.

With the testing we have available, it takes 18-24 hours to get results of a water sample. If results came back reporting high counts of *E. coli*, we would close the beach. The following day, we would test the water again and the samples would come back within normal limits. As a result from the nature of the test, beaches were open when there were high *E. coli* counts and closed when the counts were low.

Water Treatment

Companies are required by law to treat their used water before releasing it. Failure to comply can result in large federal fines set by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Your Health and Safety

At Allegan County, we care about your health and safety. We encourage individuals to use their best judgement when visiting any waterway, including rivers, inland lakes, and beaches. Visit our [Frequently Asked Question Beach Page](#) for ways to protect yourself. If there is a different smell or color that you are not used to seeing in the waterway please let ACHD or EGLE know of your concerns. If you begin experiencing symptoms related to *E. coli*, contact your health care provider and ACHD.

For up to date and accurate information, visit our website at allegancounty.org or follow us on social media @AlleganCountyHD.

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