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Letter to the Editor

Community Conversation: Is there clean water in our future?

By Rosemary Wehnes

"Back to school" conjures images of shopping for school supplies and that last trip to the beach before our children take on new academic challenges. An early lesson parents will impart to their children is that if you don't get it right the first time, then try, try again.

One of the first things children learn in school about water is that it is all connected. The very small streams and wetlands higher up in a watershed feed into larger lakes and rivers, which eventually feed our coastal waters. Because of this connection, and the fact that more than 110 million people rely on them for drinking water sources, our small streams and wetlands have been protected under the Clean Water Act for more than three decades.

When Congress did its homework and enacted the Clean Water Act in 1972, it made clear that the goal was to "restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation's waters." Congress recognized that large rivers and lakes will suffer if the smaller streams that feed into them are polluted or paved over and so extended Clean Water Act protections to the small creeks and wetlands.

In the confusion following unclear Supreme Court decisions since 2001, polluters are working to strip waters of Clean Water Act protections one by one. If they get their way, federal oversight and restrictions will no longer be required to pave over or dump waste into headwater streams, seasonal rivers and countless wetlands.

This could open up almost 60 percent of the nation's streams and over 20 million acres of wetlands to pollution and destruction. Headwater streams and small wetlands may individually appear insignificant, but they play a critical role in filtering pollutants, absorbing floodwaters, and providing habitat to fish and wildlife. These same waters are the sources of drinking water to more 199,400 people in Wisconsin, according to the EPA.

Many children will be writing essays about their summer vacations, and the story about a favorite beach being closed is not a story any teacher wants to read. Yet, recently NRDC reported that for the fourth consecutive year beach closing days nationwide have topped 20,000.

Some waters have already lost protection. In just a year and a half, uncertainty over the scope of the Clean Water Act led the EPA to drop 305 enforcement cases and lower the enforcement priority of another 147 cases.

In Wisconsin, 1.1 million acres of wetlands could be considered so-called "isolated" waters — water bodies that are particularly vulnerable to losing federal Clean Water Act safeguards. Wisconsin law protects isolated wetlands.

However, the absence of federal protections undermines the state's wetland and waterway protection programs by stretching the state's limited resources and creating confusion over what types of waters are protected under which laws.

When Congress heads "back to Washington" from its August recess, it must enact the strongest bill possible to restore Clean Water Act protections to water bodies that had been protected for decades. Wisconsin's Sen. Russ Feingold has been a leader sponsoring the Senate version of the Clean Water Restoration Act (S787.) Sen. Herb Kohl is a co-sponsor. Rep. Tom Petri should also support restoring longstanding protections of the Clean Water Act in a House bill.

How can we expect to improve rivers like the Sheboygan, Manitowoc, Fox and Rock without protecting smaller streams which flow into them? We must not surrender progress we have made in cleaning up the nation's waters. Congress should try, try again to reaffirm the historic scope of the Clean Water Act.

Rosemary Wehnes is the Sierra Club's Midwest associate representative. Write to her at: 6526 River Parkway, Wauwatosa or by e-mail to: rosemary.wehnes@sierraclub.org.