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MDEQ offers E. coli mapping tool

For the first time, Michigan residents will be able to get up-to-date information about the presence of E. coli in their community and the potential sources of the bacteria with the creation of a new interactive mapping tool.

The new statewide tool accompanies the launch of public discussion about Michigan's plan to reduce E. coli levels in rivers, lakes and beaches.

The tool is available at www.michigan.gov/ecolitmdl.

The reduction plan, known as the Total Maximum Daily Load, outlines a cooperative strategy by state and local agencies, watershed groups, landowners, and environmental groups.

Michigan is the first state in the Midwest to move forward with establishing a statewide approach to addressing E. coli.

It is a big first step toward achieving acceptable water quality and is meant to educate and empower people to be an active part of the solution.

Routine testing recently has shown E. coli levels in many areas are above the established standards.

Currently there are 196 rivers, lakes and beaches identified by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality with higher than acceptable levels.

These levels increase the risk of illness upon contact or incidental ingestion of the water.

Sources of E. coli can include untreated human sewage, failing septic tanks, livestock agriculture, pets, wildlife and illegal connections from home sewer systems to surface water.

As noted in the Governor's 21st Century Infrastructure Commission Report, failing septic systems and other deteriorating infrastructures are major contributors to E. coli levels and represent a significant public safety concerns.

The report recommended the creation of a statewide septic code as well as encouraging communities to identify and prioritize aging infrastructure for replacement.

The MDEQ is initiating a public discussion period on the existing regulatory and best management practices outlined in the proposed TMDL. The discussion includes webinars, public presentations and stakeholder comments.

A required formal, 30-day, public comment period will take place in early spring following the initial feedback.