

# The Pine River: dangerous or just clogged?



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## By Rosemary Horvath Staff Writer

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality has finished its 2017 E. coli sampling of the Upper Pine River Watershed in Isabella and Gratiot counties.

Aquatic Biologist Molly Rippke wrote in an email last week that data is still being reviewed.

Here is what is known so far:

Twelve of the 13 sites exceeded the daily geometric mean total for body contact standard at least once (300 E.coli/100 ml).

The South Branch Pine River site at South Brinton Road in Isabella's Rolland Township met all of MDEQ's E. coli water quality standards. "Which is exceptional," Rippke said.

Six sites exceeded the partial body contact standard at least once, which is 1000 E.coli per 100 ml.

Saginaw Valley State University has the "bacterial source tracking samples filtered and frozen" and will eventually analyze them for human and bovine biomarkers.

MDEQ selected SVSU for its microbial source tracking DNA lab because the lab expressed interest in the water quality of the Pine River, Rippke said.

The 13 sites throughout the watershed were sampled for nutrients and monitored weekly for five weeks.

Rippke explained that even if E. coli is detected, it is not an indication the water body always has E. coli present.

"What it means is on that date, at that time, at that location, there was an elevated risk if you were to have contact with the river."

She added that elevated risk does not mean a person will get sick.

"It only means that there is a higher chance of getting sick or developing an infection," she said.

Sample results taken one time do not represent the water quality all the time. She explained that "bacteria in the water are fleeting in that they flow along in the river, settle out, become diluted, or die."

But at the same time, more bacteria may be contaminating the river causing levels to fluctuate.

For instance, congregated on the shore of the Alma Mill Pond at Conservation Park and floating in the river in St. Louis are ducks probably contributing bacteria.

After heavy rains, levels of E. coli are elevated which is why the Mid-Michigan District [Health](#) Department erected cautionary signs at different locations along the river.

The river may not be safe for swimming after a thunderstorm or a large rain event.

But then E. coli bacteria levels can fluctuate widely on a daily basis.

For example, district health departments that regulate beaches can close a beach because of bacteria and reopen it later in the day, or on the next day. MMDHD Health Officer Marcus Cheatham does not have the funding for

sampling waters and instead relies on Alma College and MDEQ to collect data. The department also keeps track of data from the Chippewa, Tittabawassee and Maple rivers.

“The evidence tells us there is good news about the Pine River,” Cheatham replied by email. The river “supports thriving communities of fish and other aquatic life. This is a river worth fighting for.”

Cheatham believes fishing and boating in the Alma impoundment is safe as is the rest of the Pine River but it isn’t safe to swim there.

“So the E. coli problem does not mean we are all going to die if we touch the water, it is part of the bigger problem of growing organic pollution in all our waterways that threaten recreation, waterfront development and in the long run, our state’s drinking water.”

The Health Officer would like to see tightening up of agricultural regulations and septic ordinances that would make rivers healthier and reduce the chance of exposure to water borne disease.

Michigan is the only state that doesn’t regulate septic systems. Counties are expected to enact ordinances requiring regular maintenance and when new septic systems should replace old ones.

Too often in many smaller inland lakes, older lake cottages make way for larger homes but the same antiquated septic system is overlooked.

The old systems can’t handle a number of nutrients that come from larger homes, said Alan Steinman, director of the Annis Water Resource Institute in Muskegon at Grand Valley State University.

Steinman has studied the toxic cyanobacteria blooms on Spring Lake in Ottawa County for years, believed caused by nutrient phosphorous.

He heads up new research at the Institute that looks how nitrogen also might be a factor.

Blame laid on producers

Opponents of large animal operations in Gratiot County and elsewhere seem to believe some, if not most, operators dispose of animal manure in the river. They cite this for the plant and algae growth in the river.

Rippke confirmed there has been no dumping or discharge complaints filed this year in the Pine River watershed.

And it is false that people are fined by the DEQ for making too many complaints.

“We encourage people to make reports of suspicious activity such as dumping of manure or sewage, including suspicious discharges from homes,” Rippke said.

A pollution report can be made anonymously through a form at <https://miwaters.deq.state.mi.us/miwaters/>.

Or call the Pollution Emergency Alert System at 800-292-4706 which is staffed 24/7.

Photos can be submitted through the MiWaters website complaint form.

“We hope that people will grab a camera or cell phone if they witness dumping, and report issues to the DEQ,” Rippke said.

Although the cost is prohibitive, removing the Alma dam and impoundment would be an effective solution.

An overabundance of vegetation in the river could be partially blamed on the reservoir and Alma dam.

“The presence of a dam slows the natural stream flow,” Rippke said.

Blooms thrive in shallow, warm, nonmoving bodies of water like a dam and

impoundment.

“This results in sediment accumulation and conditions where aquatic plants can become established.”

She went on to explain excessive nutrients coming from upstream sources would be held by the dam, negatively impacting water quality.

“Truly returning the river to how it once was would require removing the dam and eliminating the reservoir.

“It is my opinion that sediment built-up in the impoundment is resulting in the changes that residents are seeing.”

Rippke added that the dam has been in place for a long time (since the 1930s and is owned by the city), “and the gradual infilling of the impoundment is inevitable without periodic dredging, which is expensive.”

She said as the impoundment becomes more shallow, it becomes more amenable to plants and is more like a wetland rather than a lake.



An overabundance of vegetation clogs portions of the river in Alma and St. Louis. (Herald photo – Horvath)