

Watershed Planning – Impaired Waters

What is an impaired water?

The State of Minnesota defines impaired waters as those lakes, rivers, streams, and wetlands that currently do not meet their designated beneficial use and associated water quality standards. For every lake, river, stream, or wetland, the water quality standards define the maximum concentrations of specific pollutants that may be present in that water body without adversely affecting a particular designated use.

What are designated beneficial uses?

In the 1970s, each river, stream, and lake in Minnesota was assigned a designated use. Designated uses include aquatic life, recreation, drinking water, agriculture, wildlife, and other uses.

How is a lake, river, stream, or wetland determined to be impaired and what does this mean?

The federal Clean Water Act requires the state of Minnesota to monitor the water quality of lakes, rivers, and streams and then assess the condition of these water bodies. Once the water bodies are assessed, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency must prepare a list of water bodies not meeting state water quality standards and not meeting their designated beneficial use. This list becomes the official impaired waters list.

Once a water body is listed as impaired, a study called a total maximum daily load or TMDL study must be conducted for each pollutant that causes a water body to fail to meet its designated use and associated state water quality standards. The result of a TMDL study is a written plan that analyzes the problem and determines how water quality standards can be met in the future. The TMDL study establishes the maximum amount of a pollutant that a lake, river, stream, or wetland can receive and still meet water quality standards for the designated use.

What is the Metropolitan Council's role in impaired waters?

The Council is working with local partners to help them develop the required TMDL study for impaired waters in their area.

The Council can provide extensive water quality data and assessment information to communities to use in their evaluations of water quality. The Council has been monitoring water quality for various pollutants in watersheds in the metropolitan area since 1989. The original program was expanded in 1995 and again in 1998.

Currently the Council and our partners monitor 22 sites in the metropolitan area. This data is readily available for use in developing baseline water quality assessments. The Council also coordinates the Metro Geographic Information System (GIS) network which has GIS data layers for land cover, soils, topography, stream network, watershed boundaries, and other data layers needed to run complex computer models.

For more information on the Council's impaired waters efforts, please contact Judy Sventek at: judy.sventek@metc.state.mn.us or 651-602-1156.