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Study: Clean waters boost property values

Student researchers from around U.S. working with UW-Stout cite economic disadvantage of algae-filled area lakes

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MENOMONIE — Lake property in Cumberland is valued at \$32,000 more than lake property in Menomonie.

That is the determination of research by Helena Pedrotti, one of 11 students from across the U.S. participating in the Linking Applied Knowledge in Environmental Sustainability Research Experience for Undergraduates, or LAKES REU, program.

Under the guidance of UW-Stout professors, the student researchers spent about two months researching blue-green algae blooms and the impacts on Tainter Lake and Lake Menomin caused by phosphorus pollution. It is part of a three-year project funded by a \$282,000 National Science Foundation grant. This is the third year of the grant.

Students shared their findings this week in Menomonie.

In Cumberland, water clarity is about 8 to 13 feet down compared with about 3 feet on Tainter Lake, north of Menomonie, and Lake Menomin in Menomonie.

For every foot of water clarity, property values go up about \$3,650, Pedrotti, a student at Reed College in Portland, Ore., determined.

Images:



Staff photo by Pamela Powers

- Menomonie Area Chamber of Commerce CEO Michelle Dingwall listens to University of Connecticut student Caitlin Delaney explain the economic impact of cleaner lakes and the willingness of the public to support them with a sales tax. Delaney is one of the LAKES REU students studying at UW-Stout about the impacts of blue-green algae on area waterways. They presented their findings this week.

LAKES REU student Erin Melly of Columbia University in New York City found that of people surveyed in Menomonie, 78 percent go to other lakes for recreation away from Tainter and Menomin.

If the two local lakes were clearer, 65 percent of them said they would swim in the lake, 48 percent kayak and 40 percent fish.

“Based on this, people would use and value the lake higher if it were cleaner,” Melly said.

Menomonie residents reported traveling to Chippewa and Barron counties, other lakes in Dunn County, Douglas County and even Minnesota to recreate on water, she noted.

“Some of the lakes are not that much cleaner,” Melly said. “Reducing algae blooms could keep people here.”

The next step would be to determine what economic impact it would have to keep people local on the lakes rather than leaving Menomonie, she noted.

Sales tax potential

Caitlin Delaney of the University of Connecticut studied whether residents in Barron and Dunn counties would consider adding a 0.1 percent sales tax to help provide incentives to keep phosphorus out of waterways. That tax would generate about \$440,600 annually in Dunn County and just more than \$714,000 in Barron County.

Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed said they would support such a sales tax in Dunn County and 51 percent in Barron County.

The sales tax revenues could be used to encourage property owners to use best management soil practices such as cover crops, no till planting and stream buffers.

Nels Paulson, a UW-Stout professor and LAKES REU director, said the university likely will know in December if the National Science Foundation grant will be available again.

Over the past three years, Paulson said, the student research has provided valuable information about phosphorus and the blue-green algae bloom on area waterways. Students have been able to build their research off past years' research only making it better and more in depth.

"We are seeing meaningful change in land practices and meaningful support in the community," he noted.

Area partnership

Ron Verdon, president of the Tainter Menomin Lake Improvement Association, said the research will continue with the Red Cedar River Water Quality Partnership, a project designed to help reduce the toxic blue-green algae blooms. Verdon attended the research project event on Wednesday.

The partnership comprises UW-Stout, the state Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, UW-Extension, the West Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, local governments, lakes groups, businesses and others.

The DNR awarded a \$200,000 lake protection grant to the project, and the Army Corps of Engineers has committed \$300,000 in water quality assessment funding from 2016 through 2018 to identify solutions and implement them to help reduce toxic blue-green algae blooms in the nearly 1,900-square mile watershed across 10 west-central Wisconsin counties.

"There were a lot of good topics that I think are extremely important for the recovery of the watershed," Verdon said. "It is exciting to these interdisciplinary works done."

Verdon said he appreciated the research being done with objective points of view.

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