

GRATIOT COUNTY

Alma works to refine city's E. coli testing in Pine River

Current process isn't specific enough for EPA to take action

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While the state and city agree bacteria counts are high, Alma is refining its Pine River water testing after learning testing so far isn't specific enough for action from the Department of Environmental Quality.

Molly Rippke, an aquatic biologist with the DEQ, said the city of Alma was testing the river for fecal coliform, a group of bacteria found in animal waste that contains E. coli. The testing needs to be specifically for E. coli levels to meet DEQ standards.

Alma City Manager Phil Moore said that while the city's tests were for total fecal coliform, testing the "overall health of the river," Alma College's water testing is specifically for E. coli, and their results parallel the city's.

On June 15, water testing showed a huge jump in bacteria, specifically in an area near where the Honeyoey Creek dumps into the Pine near Luce Road. Test results on the city's website show a jump from 270 parts per ml. to 6,000 over five days at Riverview Drive.

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— Phil Moore, Alma city manager



LISA YANICK-JONAITIS — THE MORNING SUN

The Honeyoey Creek just upstream from the Pine River outside of Alma on Thursday. Water tests taken by the city and the college show high levels of E. coli near where the two meet.

E. Coli

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Tim Keeton, an associate professor of biology at Alma College said the college's test results show a similar jump specifically for E. coli the same day, with numbers over 1,000. Any number over 300 exceeds the maximum, and the college stops testing the samples once the numbers reach 1,000.

Moore said the city is now working with the college to test the river, and both are looking to the Mid Michigan District Health Department and the DEQ to help with what comes next.

Keeton said his priority is to help the city with testing so it meets DEQ standards. He's researching certified labs that can handle the request.

Keeton said the river must be tested five times in a 30 day period; those samples must be tested with six hours of collection, which creates a challenge. Samples will need to be sent on ice, and labs will have a small window in which to do their work.

"You don't solve a problem by ignoring it, you face it head on," Moore said. "It looks to me like we do have a problem."

Moore said while the drinking water is fine and unaffected, the health of the river is important to the community.

"The river quality could be better, and that should be a goal," he said.

Moore said it's up to the health department to decide what, if any, warning the public should heed if in fact E. coli numbers continue to

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be high.

Marcus Cheatham, the health officer for Mid Michigan District Health Department, said it's been so long since his department had a budget for water quality testing that there isn't even a process or a standard in place.

"It's a good thing that the city and the college are doing testing," Cheatham said. "We will be able to look at their data, good data, in order to make a decision."

Right now, Cheatham said his department is scrambling to have a public health policy on E. coli levels approved by the Board of Health so it can be implemented if necessary.

"There needs to be a pattern of high E. coli levels. If that happens, there could be one of two advisories," Cheatham said.

The first would warn that the river isn't safe for full body contact, like swimming.

If levels are high enough, the health department could advise that water is not safe for partial contact, like putting a hand in the water while fishing.

Cheatham said he hopes to have a policy approved within a week.

"The board understands this is important and that the community is standing by, waiting," Cheatham said.

Rippke said she and the DEQ are anxiously awaiting data from both the city and the college.

"Our role is long-term," Rippke said. "We look at a pattern, and then we look for causes and solutions."

Rippke said without data or work plans from either the city or the college the DEQ's help or action plan is purely hypothetical.

If for example, the river doesn't meet a standard, the DEQ will list the body of water as impaired. That would trigger further studies.

Rippke, who said E. coli is her specialty, said the bacteria can get into water from various sources, including water runoff that contains animal or human fecal matter.

The Honeyoey Creek is surrounded by square miles of farm fields upstream from the Pine, and heavy rains preceded high bacteria counts where the creek meets the Pine. Rippke said runoff from the fields is a possible cause.

She also said among other things, septic fields, especially near old farm fields, are often a culprit.

The first step, she said, is proper testing of the water to determine average levels of E. coli, and to analyze when numbers spike or drop.

"We're doing our best to help gather the correct data," Rippke said.

