

GRATIOT COUNTY

What's to become of the Pine River?

By Linda Gittleman*For the Morning Sun*

No one who has lived in Gratiot County for any length of time has ever seen the river like it is now.

In certain spots in Alma and St. Louis, it appears that the Pine River has shrunk.

Lime green algae forms on the banks and stretches further and further into the middle of the body of water.

Or, at the bridge on Luce Road in Alma, the emerald green lily pads have encroached so far into the river and with such thickness, it appears a new land mass is forming.

“(The vegetation) will die at the end of the season,” Alma College Geologist Murray Borrello said.

But next spring?

“It's going to come back,” he said. “And, it seems to start ear-

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lier and last longer - with the ongoing nutrient load."

As the vegetation gathers on the sediment, it reduces the depth and the river becomes more shallow and narrow.

The river then warms up faster and the new growth begins with even more algae and lily pads.

Jane Keon, a resident along the river in Alma, noted the ever-increasing problem as it was last year.

"Our property values are plunging since some of us have much less water frontage. The spring flooding of our properties has increased dramatically," she said.

"Docks are no longer reaching open water. No canoeing or kayaking is possible because the water is too shallow and the outlets to the river have closed."

Eventually, Borrello said, if nothing is done, the river will likely become a narrow stream surrounded by swamp and the Pine will bear no resemblance to the river it once was.

Additional flooding is a definite possibility.

In St. Louis it's just as bad if not worse. And nei-

ther Alma City Manager Phil Moore or St. Louis City Manager Kurt Giles is a bit pleased.

"We get a lot of complaints," Moore said, adding that the Pine is a major concern.

But there is little the cities can do. The river can be dredged at critical spots but it would likely cost millions of dollars.

"There is no funding mechanism for that," Moore said.

And, even if the dredging were completed, it would only be a temporary solution.

If, as expected, the river's drastic change in the last 10 years is due to agricultural run offs from the area's big farms, the problem would only repeat.

Even some other clean up method - and the Department of Environmental Quality would have to approve every step - would only be temporary, Giles said.

The cities have no authority over what goes on in the farms and townships. But the state and the federal government do.

And as it is, even if local farmers obey every law and regulation now on the books - and many do - it isn't enough. Borrello said.

The laws and regulations need to change or Michigan's waterways will simply get worse.

New laws will very likely mean more time, effort - and money, Moore said.

With new procedures, food costs will go up and it becomes a battle between a clean environment and cheaper food.

"But the state is turning a blind eye," Moore said. "Some (state employees) recognize it but they keep quiet."

"You can't solve a problem unless you admit there is one," he added. "They're looking at short term only."

In the long term, a clean environment; short term - a meal."

However, the Farm Bureau, in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Environmental Quality, and

the Environmental Protection Agency has begun a new program called the Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP)

That's a program farmers may volunteer to join and several farmers in Gratiot County have.

It includes site assessments, outlines risks to the water, and carefully designs individual programs to address the risks - all part of a plan to help protect the environment, according to Laura Campbell, a MAEAP coordinator for Gratiot.

Some plans can be expensive for the farmers and may take years to complete.

The state hopes to have 6,000 farmers signed up by the year 2020, she said earlier this year.

Meanwhile though, the Pine River continues to de-

teriorate.

"This is a bigger issue state wide and it's happening in a lot of communities," Moore said. "And I can't un-

derstand why more isn't being done," he said.

Despite requests for interviews, there has been no response from the DEQ.

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