

# Tip of the Mitt Watershed: Storm water lessons learned

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Kevin Cronk, from the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council, shows those who attended a storm water presentation Thursday how automated water collection equipment works. Cronk is the monitoring and research coordinator for the nonprofit Petoskey-based environmental agency. (Sheri McWhirter/News-Review)

Northern Michigan has a dirty secret that pollutes our lakes, streams and rivers.

Storm water runoff — particularly in city settings — is a major ecological problem in this environmentally pristine and by-and-large rural region. About 10 concerned area residents attended a free storm water presentation Thursday at the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council office in Petoskey, an effort to learn more about the problem.

Kevin Cronk, the nonprofit council's monitoring and research coordinator, showed photographs taken during heavy rain events at various storm water out falls in Petoskey. The images included what appeared like chocolate milk that dropped from storm sewer pipes directly into natural water bodies.

"That's a lot of dirty water going right into the Bear River," Cronk said.

Storm water runoff is defined as precipitation that flows over the ground, particularly across impervious surfaces that prevent it from naturally soaking into the earth. That water collects debris, chemicals, dirt and other pollutants that flow into the storm sewer systems and then is discharged untreated into local lakes, streams, wetlands and coastal waters.

"This all comes off the road?" asked Jim Davies, of Harbor Springs, a retired environmental attorney from Ohio.

Most storm water pollution occurs immediately after major rain events when storm sewers experience dramatic water volume increases in a short time frame, Cronk said.

The council applied this week for a \$55,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to cover the costs to develop a storm water management plan for the Petoskey area. The exercise would result in a public education plan, monitoring, mapping and assessment procedures and treatment options, Cronk said.

In a related development, the Charlevoix County chapter of the Michigan Townships Association currently is working on a possible storm water ordinance intended to be adopted by all cities and townships. That effort remains ongoing.

Currently, the council monitors storm water out fall sites in Petoskey, Boyne City and East Jordan, three in the former and two in each of the latter communities. The program annually costs about \$15,000 for those seven sites, supported by local community foundations.

Dee Irwin, from Charlevoix, said the council's existing storm water education campaign led her to consider the problem for the first time.

"I never thought about it before then," she said.

Cronk said he intends to use data collected from the storm water monitoring effort to calculate the estimated pollutant pounds per year that enter local watersheds, including phosphorous, heavy metals and more.

Meanwhile, there are solutions individual homeowners can implement to reduce their individual storm water runoff impact.

Cronk said rain gardens allow water from sidewalks and patios to drain into nearby soil, rather than into storm sewers. Also, more expensive filtration systems can be installed, or something as simple as rain barrels, devices to collect rainfall from building roofs, he said.

"I already want one of the barrels," said Dee Davies, Jim's wife.

Visit [www.watershedcouncil.org](http://www.watershedcouncil.org) for more information about this and other water-related environmental issues.

### **How it hurts**

Storm water runoff degrades aquatic ecosystems and contaminates drinking water sources multiple ways. Some examples are:

- Sediments: habitat loss, oxygen depletion, thermal changes, excess nutrients
- Thermal pollution: water temperatures increase and impact cold water fish, such as trout

- Excess nutrients: lead to algae blooms, oxygen depletion, cyanobacteria
- Bacteria & other pathogens: human and animal origins, public health threat
- Debris: can choke, suffocate or disable aquatic life
- Toxins: household insecticides, pesticides and paint, also automobile oil, grease, antifreeze and metals
- Erosion: large water volumes leads to stream channel scouring and bank erosion

Source: Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council

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