

Watershed groups fight decades-old pollution

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LANSING — Michigan watersheds are still wracked with pollution from decades ago, along with new runoff, said Rebecca Esselman, the executive director of the Huron River Watershed Council.

When the federal Clean Water Act was passed in 1972, rivers got cleaner, but not perfect, she said.

“We still deal with some legacy contamination,” Esselman said. “Stuff that’s still in the soil and groundwater in the watershed and stuff that is still in the sediments in the river from that industrial history.”

Ecological restoration projects that groups like the watershed council are leading are crucial to Michigan’s water quality, Esselman said.

According to the Michigan Water Environment Association, there are close to 30 such groups in the state.

They include the River Raisin Watershed Council based in Adrian, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council based in Petoskey, Watershed Center Grand Traverse Bay based in Traverse City, Middle Grand River Organization of Watersheds based in Lansing and the Crystal Lake & Watershed Association based in Beulah.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s MI Healthy Climate Plan would make preserving land and water a statewide priority.

Esselman said three things have hurt watersheds such as the 900-square-mile Huron: legacy contamination from old industry, agricultural runoff and emerging contaminants. Emerging contaminants are unregulated synthetic chemicals that make their way into the water, like PFAS.

“A lot of these contaminants are not visible, although some of the damage to the river system is visible,” she said.

Algae blooms are often a common sign of unhealthy water, she said.

According to the Environmental Protection Agen-



Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in Petoskey is shown. JILLIAN FELLOWS/NEWS-REVIEW

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cy, contaminated drinking water can cause gastrointestinal illness, adverse nervous system and reproductive effects, and chronic illnesses.

To clean up the watershed, which drains water to the Huron River through hundreds of tributaries, the council restores habitat, removes dams and builds green infrastructure.

“Maybe the No. 1 best thing you can do for a river is to remove a dam,” Esselman said.

She said turning a free flowing river into a stillwater system can hurt the ecosystem’s health, so removing the dam returns the river to its natural state.

She said a decade ago, the Ann Arbor-based council removed a dam in Dexter and is now working to remove the Peninsular Dam in Ypsilanti.

The council has also been increasingly focused on green infrastructure.

“This is using nature to capture and clean water before it hits the river,” she said. “So we use things like rain gardens, porous pavement and even land protection because our natural lands like our forests and

prairies do a far better job at cleaning our water than concrete.”

She said while the council has been able to help the watershed, funding is one of the constraints it experiences, along with policy and regulatory constraints.

Esselman said she is happy to see Whitmer’s MI Healthy Climate Plan emphasizes protecting natural lands.

“Ensuring that we are keeping as much of our natural lands as possible in this state will be an investment by our government that will help keep our waterways clean and our drinking water safe,” she said.

The plan, which was unveiled in April, included protecting 30 percent of Michigan’s land and water by 2030 to use as natural greenhouse gas capturers.

It also includes a commitment to avoid converting land for uses that increase greenhouse gas emissions and to encourage land use for green infrastructure.

Liesl Clark, the director of the Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, said the plan reflects discussions with advocacy groups, public transit, government officials and others throughout the state.

Clark called the plan a game-changer for the state’s economy and environment.