



Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network
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News Release

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Partnership of groups from across region release assessment of failing septic systems in Saginaw Bay coastal counties

Often identified as a source of water pollution in region, partners initiate analysis that indicates failing septic systems are a likely cause of local and regional water quality issues

A new analysis released today by the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) indicates that failing septic systems may be a significant cause of water quality issues in Saginaw Bay, especially in coastal counties and rivers. The analysis was completed by Public Sector Consultants (PSC) of Lansing, and was guided by a local committee made up of representatives of The Conservation Fund, Saginaw Basin Land Conservancy, Michigan United Conservation Clubs, Sea Grant Extension, BaySail, Saginaw Bay Resource Conservation and Development, Saginaw Bay Water Trail Alliance, the Partnership for the Saginaw Bay Watershed and East Michigan Council of Governments (EMCOG). The analysis was supported by a grant from the C.S. Mott Foundation of Flint, MI and focused on the coastal counties of Bay, Arenac, Huron, Iosco and Tuscola. The report is released during “Septic Smart Week” as declared by Governor Snyder (<https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/MIDEQ/bulletins/20c4061>)

When properly designed, sited, installed, and maintained, septic systems provide cost-effective and environmentally safe disposal of wastewater. Similar to other household infrastructure, like a furnace or roof, septic systems have an expected service life and require periodic maintenance. Many septic systems are designed to operate for approximately 30 years, depending on individual use and upkeep. When septic systems outlive their useful service life, they may no longer effectively treat wastewater and can discharge sewage into the environment. While significant investment has been made in municipal sewer systems to stop them as a discharge source, individual, private systems have seen little focus.

The analysis indicates that between 6,000 and 15,000 systems in the 5-county study area are likely failing, releasing as much as 1.26 billion gallons of sewage into the environment annually. This translates to filling nearly 2,000 Olympic-size swimming pools *every year* with untreated sewage. Untreated sewage can cause health issues, foul beaches, cause water advisories and affect the economy. While regulated at some level by county health departments, Michigan remains the only state in the country without a state-wide septic code.

“While the WIN program tends not to focus on policy issues, we have made multiple investments in information technology upgrades for septic systems at the county level, and we have supported what remains Michigan’s only revolving fund for residential septic repair and replacement in Bay County”, said Michael Kelly of The Conservation Fund. “The analysis shows that we continue to have issues, and that this is something that the counties and state need to take more seriously. There is a real opportunity for Saginaw Bay coastal counties to lead the state”, continued Kelly. Currently, septic systems are only inspected at installation, but data on septic systems installed before 1960 is difficult to find. Ten counties in Michigan have adopted a time-of-sale inspection program, most recently in Isabella County which drains toward Saginaw Bay. None of the coastal counties in the study area have an ordinance of that type. “Point-of-sale should likely be the minimum baseline that we use, especially near the Bay and our coastal rivers, in areas of particular concern”, said Kelly.

“There is a convergence of efforts in the Saginaw Bay watershed to address environmental issues related to inadequate treatment of household wastewater. These activities are bound to improve public health, water quality and habitat conditions. We'll all benefit from that”, said Bill Wright, Chairman of the Partnership for the Saginaw Bay Watershed (PSBW). PSBW is the designated Public Advisory Council for the Saginaw Bay/River Area of Concern. “The citizens Public Advisory Council for the Saginaw Bay Watershed has reviewed beach water quality data and our Bay County beaches show that they have steadily improved over the past ..10 years. Municipal wastewater treatment plants along the Saginaw River were upgraded through the 1990’s significantly improving the river quality, and now small on-site septic wastewater treatment systems need to ensure they are operating and maintained properly too.” continued Wright.

The full report is available at <http://www.saginawbaywin.org/uploads/An-Assessment-of-Failing-Septic-Systems-in-the-Saginaw-Bay-Region-final.pdf>

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The Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN) is a collaborative, community driven quality of life initiative created by a variety of environmental, business and community interests in 1996. WIN was formed to create a more sustainable future for all who live, work and play within the 22-county Saginaw Bay watershed. One of the ways in which WIN accomplishes this objective is by providing financial support to projects that link the economic, environmental and social needs of the region. Key WIN funding partners include: Bay Area Community Foundation, Consumers Energy Foundation, Harry A. and Margaret D. Towsley Foundation, Midland Area Community Foundation, Rollin M. Gerstacker Foundation, Saginaw Community Foundation, The Dow Chemical Company Foundation, The Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation, S.C. Johnson Fund, the Cook Family Foundation, the C.S. Mott Foundation and the Saginaw Bay Foundation. Since its inception, WIN has awarded in excess of \$6 million to more than 300 projects across the region. More information on WIN is available at www.saginawbaywin.org or by calling 989.892.9171.