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Scientific Study Identifies Septic Pollution in Whitefish Lake

Contamination levels are safe now but could become harmful if left unaddressed

Whitefish Lake - File photo by Lido Vizzutti/Flathead Beacon

By Myers Reece, 03-31-12

A recently released study has confirmed septic pollution in Whitefish Lake, with the report's authors determining that contamination levels are safe but must be addressed before worsening in the future.

The Whitefish Lake Institute released its report in March, based off the results of sampling 20 sites on the lake between May and October of last year. The "septic leachate" discovered in the study stems from failing and outdated septic systems located on properties around the lake.

The study was sponsored by the Whitefish County Water District and funded by the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Lori Curtis, science and education director at the Whitefish Lake Institute, said the lake is "generally safe" right now, but said further contamination could make the lake unsafe for drinking water, swimming and wildlife. Curtis said it's a "common problem around a lake where people live."

> "One, it will become unsafe for humans to swim in because there will be bacteria that can cause very serious ailments," Curtis said of a worsened condition. "And two, the lake itself will become unhealthy. You start to lose plant and animal communities and it looks and smells terrible and it becomes an economic issue."

Septic leachate is described in the report as the liquid that remains after wastewater drains through septic solids. The liquid contains "elevated concentrations" of bacteria and organic compounds from human waste, detergents and other household materials.

Properly functioning septic systems "are designed to collect wastewater to neutralize these contaminants before they enter ground or surface water systems," the report states. But poorly functioning systems can release contaminants into the groundwater, which makes its way to the lake water.

"Even when properly installed and maintained, septic systems have a finite life expectancy," the reports says.

The three contaminated areas confirmed in the report are City Beach Bay, Viking Creek and Lazy Bay. Two areas listed as having high potential for septic leachate contamination are Lazy Channel and Dog Bay State Park Seep. Four other areas are identified for medium potential. The remaining shoreline sites in the study currently have a low potential for contamination.

The institute's report echoes previous reports dating back to the 1980s that also found septic contamination in the lake.

There are various possible ways to address the issue, Curtis said. For one, some people live in an area where they can hook up to the city's sewer system, though not everybody along the lake can. Others can upgrade their septic tank to a modern system.

But, Curtis notes, "everything you do costs money." Curtis said there are federal and state funds available to assist in septic upgrades. Right now, she said the goal is to educate the public and consult with local government to identify options for moving forward.

"The idea is to get some education out there and get the people who are experts on building and installing septic systems to help us understand what's going on and what needs to be done," Curtis said.

Whitefish Mayor John Muhlfeld, who has a background in hydrology and water issues, said he has reviewed the report and takes its findings seriously. Muhlfeld hopes to examine the issue at a city council work session with the Whitefish Lake Institute scheduled in early May.

"We're in the infant stages of digesting this information," he said. "It's the role of the institute to provide the science to the city and it's up to the city to decide how we take that science and put into policy."

"It's a big issue," he added, "and it's going to be very costly if this community wants to get serious about addressing septic leachate."