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## What is in our water? A Lake Ida couple struggles with pollution-related problems

Don and Sharon Underhill live along the peaceful shores of Lake Ida. But they cannot fish or swim in the waters fronting their property.

By: Wendy Wilson, Alexandria Echo Press

Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series examining pollution in Douglas County waters.

Don and Sharon Underhill live along the peaceful shores of Lake Ida.

But they cannot fish or swim in the waters fronting their property.

Thick algae and weed growth carpets the waters near their dock. The Underhills believe runoff, possibly manure, entering the lake from a creek running through the side of their property is to blame. The stream flows near agricultural land in the area.

### NITRATES IN

### WELL WATER

Water samples taken from the Underhills' well in 2010 revealed high levels of nitrates – 70 percent higher than the maximum contaminant level allowed by the Safe Drinking Water Act, according to results received from S.M. Traut Wells Laboratory.

A reverse osmosis system was installed, but Sharon said she still avoids drinking the water.

"I think the Underhills are jumping to conclusions about things," Douglas County Land and Resource Management Director Dave Rush said. "They have a very shallow well and nitrogen contamination is very common in shallow wells in Douglas County."

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Lake Ida



The water in front of Don and Sharon Underhill's property on Lake Ida is covered with algae and immersed in thick weed beds. The Underhills believe pollution is the cause.

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Rush said the water from his own well also contained high nitrate levels that were unsafe for his infant children to drink even though his well was 70 feet deep. He now uses a reverse osmosis filter as well.

**1**  *Talk about it*

Nitrates are frequently from an agricultural source, according to Rush, such as chemical or natural fertilizers like manure.

“Chemical fertilizers are not [highly] regulated,” he said. “I can’t tell farmers, ‘You can’t fertilize anymore.’ We haven’t gotten that far yet in regulating what farmers can do.”

Many people living in the area may not be aware of the nitrates potentially seeping into the drinking water.

“It is a problem all over rural Minnesota because farming is very common,” Rush said. “It is a way of life out here.”

He recommended people get their wells tested regularly.

While municipal drinking water is regulated by the Department of Health, “If you have your own well, you are on your own,” he said.

### CREEK WATER

#### SAMPLES

Water samples taken from the stream on the Underhill property in 2008 and 2009 revealed high levels of E. coli bacteria and fecal coliform.

Elevated levels of phosphorus were also detected in the water samples and nitrate nitrogen was present. High amounts of these nutrients can lead to algal bloom and low oxygen levels.

“It is polluting the lake,” Don Underhill said. “There should not be that crap in the lake. You can’t swim off the dock. You can’t fish off the dock. You can’t do anything.”

He was unable to put his boat into the water this year because of the thick layer of weeds and algae.

“You can smell it,” he said. “It smells like cow [manure].”

Sharon said, “It just keeps getting worse and worse out there...In the spring thaw, it is brown – it’s black. You don’t know what is in that water.”

They contacted Rush for assistance.

“We certainly are concerned about runoff,” Rush said. “We share the Underhills’ concerns about pollution in our lakes. One of the main goals of our office is to protect the resources of the county, including lake water.”

Several farms operate in the vicinity of the Underhills’ property.

“We know the water is not good,” Rush said. “It has some pollutants. We can’t specifically tie pollutants to just that farm over there.”

Rush said there are numerous sources for runoff into lakes.

“Pointing the finger at a single source for pollution is difficult at best,” he said. “We can’t just point to one location and say that’s where the pollution is coming from.”

Rush said drain tile and runoff from adjacent farms that might use chemicals with unknown management practices could add to the pollution problem.

Several options exist to reduce agricultural runoff, according to Rush, including grass buffers and raised entrances to tile or submerged tiles.

Rush said his office has worked closely with a farm with a feedlot located near the Underhill property.

“He’s making efforts to do things that are good practices that are protecting our surface waters,” he said.

The farmer made renovations and added a grassed buffer area, so any potential runoff would run parallel to the channel, Rush said.

“Yes, there is a feedlot there and that feedlot produces manure – it is land-applied,” Rush said.

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"Manure applications by farmers are significantly more regulated than chemical fertilizer applications."

Rush said the Underhills' water problems are being monitored.

"I was not alarmed by what I saw in those results because almost all runoff from agricultural areas carry certain pollutants with it and those pollutants are nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorous and sediment," he said, adding, "We tend to get some fecal coliform in our runoff."

#### A COMMUNITY

#### RESPONSIBILITY

According to Rush, the Underhills' problem is not new.

"They are not unique," he said. "It's just that we are focused on that because it has been brought to our attention. This problem exists all over Douglas County – all over Minnesota. We – as a local community and as a nation – have a hard time getting our arms around it. It is everybody's fault and we all have to fix it..."

"From our perspective, there are a number of sources of pollution that contribute to the degradation of our lakes and agriculture is just one of those broad sources. But everybody who owns a piece of lakefront property also contributes – because they all have runoff."

Rush said lawn fertilizers and failing to leave natural vegetation near the shoreline contributes to pollution problems.

#### ALGAE GROWTH

"I certainly think that [the Underhills] have some issues with some algae and some pretty significant weed growth out in front of their property," Rush said.

But he said weed growth and algae mats were common problems this year.

"We have had a lot of rain this year," he said. "We have had a tremendous amount of runoff go into our lakes...sediment and nutrients and all kinds of things that encourage plant growth...that hasn't happened in the recent past. We don't have answers."

#### POTENTIAL

#### SOLUTIONS

Rush said he would continue to work with the Underhills to find the sources of the pollution, but he said their problems are typical for properties located at the bottom of the watershed.

He has been working with the township and Soil and Water Conservation District to slow the runoff and limit the sediment coming through the creek, but it was a complicated process.

An agricultural producer could build a pond to hold any runoff, Rush said.

"That doesn't address anything that's coming from the tiles further up in the farm district," he said. "I think there's more than one source. We need to address all the sources."

He acknowledged frustration as well.

"There aren't rules that say if there's any sediment or nutrients coming into the lake it must be stopped," Rush said. "We don't have state rules that say there shall be only crystal clean water that goes into our lakes."

For now, Rush said they would continue to monitor the situation and address any problems.

"We need to continue to work with all of the folks in that watershed to find ways to decrease the amount of pollutants that might be getting into the lakes."

They are trying to convince residents to restore shorelines and do their part in preventing pollution from entering the water.

"We can't make people do it," he said. "There are no laws that address what we're supposed to do about non-point source pollution."

Rush suggested the Soil and Water Conservation District and the Lake Ida Association apply for grant money to put in a continuous monitoring system on the stream on a regular basis, but the process is laborious and costly.



"We as a people won't do what needs to be done because it's expensive and inconvenient and

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politically unsavory," he said. "As soon as we all start recognizing that we all have a responsibility – that we're all part of the cause – will we be able to be part of the solution."

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