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COLA members volunteer for water testing

By Tom Hintgen
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It's that time of year when members of the Otter Tail Coalition of Lakes Association (COLA), in coordination with RMB Environmental Laboratories of Detroit Lakes, step up to the plate and volunteer for water

testing. "Our mission is to improve the quality of water in our lakes," said COLA President Bob Deutschman to fellow members who met Saturday morning at the community center in Ottertail. "Water testing, and related data, are used to promote stewardship of

shoreline properties." COLA volunteers collect water samples once a month from May through September. The monitoring program involves the collection of total phosphorus and chlorophyll samples.

Water transparency is measured with a Secchi disk. Other observations such as lake level, rainfall and recreational suitability are also documented.

Moriya Rufer, RMB lakes program coordinator who spoke to COLA members Saturday morning, said volunteers are critical to a successful lake monitoring program.

"We, at the lab in Detroit Lakes, analyze long-term trends to see if water quality is improving or declining," she told COLA members.

Negative water quality, in addition to having adverse affects on man and wildlife, can also affect property values along area lakes, rivers and streams, she said. Rufer said she's aware of property values decreasing where there's a three-foot decrease in water clarity.

Deutschman, as president of COLA, said it's important for members to work with Rufer and RMB Environmental Laboratories in educating lake property owners about the fertility and productivity levels of lakes and rivers — and to promote stewardship along shoreline properties.

There are signs that can tell lake property owners if their water quality isn't what it should be.

"One example is the common loon, our Minnesota state bird" said Rufer. "Loons need clear water as they search for fish and need undisturbed shorelines with natural vegetation for nesting. If you don't see many loons on your lake, that could be a negative sign."

Mayflies, she said, can't survive in water that lacks oxygen. They're good indicators of the amount of phosphorus in lakes.

Phosphorus, said Rufer, is a nutrient important for plant growth. In most lakes, phosphorus is the limiting nutrient, which means that everything that plants and algae need to grow is available in excess (sunlight, warmth, water, nitrogen, etc.)

As for myths, she said that swimmers itch does not necessarily mean poor water quality in a lake.

"We get caught in the middle when a parasite leaves snails and enters our skin instead of birds," she said. "The result is swimmers itch."

Another myth, she said, is that septic systems are to blame for many poor-quality lakes.

"The fact is that septic systems — when properly designed, installed and operated — will provide both economical and effective sewage treatments," she said.

Rufer said it's harmful to lakes when people use soaps and shampoos in lake waters.

"Film from the soap and shampoo can cause surface tension to break," she said.

"Insects that usually walk on water fall in and drown."

Volunteer water testers can take their samples directly to the RMB lab in Detroit Lakes or drop off the samples to Kermit Larson at Little Pine Lake near Perham, Carolyn Herron at Star Lake near Dent or to Don Davenport at Clitherall Lake. Those three volunteers, in turn, will take the water samples to RMB.



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Moriya Rufer, RMB lakes program coordinator, spoke to COLA members Saturday morning at the community center in Ottertail.