

Jacey Schlosser, St. Olaf Township, Otter Tail County

“Extra, extra! Read all about it!” It seems the recent headlines are filled with doom and gloom in regards to water quality related issues. Lead contamination in Michigan drinking water, toxic algae blooms in Ohio, a devastating chemical spill in West Virginia. Minnesota, long known as the land of 10,000 lakes, is not immune to water quality concerns. A Minnesota Pollution Control Agency employee has stated that close to half of Minnesota’s lakes and rivers have varying levels of damage resulting in water quality concerns. This is a concern for every citizen and every business, because clean water and safe drinking water starts with protecting source water including streams, lakes, rivers, and wet lands. The federal Clean Water Act has identified water quality standards that take into consideration fishing, recreation, aquatic life, wildlife, agriculture, industry, and drinking water. Of course these are all important aspects, but they are especially impactful to the economy in Minnesota. The tourism industry in Minnesota generates over \$13 billion dollars annually to the state’s economy, while over \$75 billion dollars are generated due to agricultural activities according to the USDA. Human activities have no doubt played a role in the current water quality crisis. There has been significant finger pointing when attempting to address who or what is responsible for contributing to this issue. The truth is everyone is responsible.

“It is important for local governments to recognize and use their powers to foster sustainability. Local governments have significant power and influence to determine whether policies and programs under their authority create sustainable or unsustainable conditions.” Sarah James and Jane Sekera authors of article in Public Administration Times

Local governments must educate and communicate as they have the most direct contact with the public. This education starts with training the local authorities so that they have a better understanding of the federal policies and programs along with understanding their responsibilities at the local level. This will allow local agencies to better plan for sustainability when implementing codes, ordinances, land use and development.

Local government can set an example for other businesses and industry to follow if they develop a lead by example type of agenda. Local agencies need to define sustainability practices for their specific area and implement them within their organizations first. They can help promote sustainability directives by providing education to the local industries, farmers, and households to raise awareness about best practices and environmental choices that can ultimately affect water quality. Webinars, town hall meetings, social media, multi-lingual print materials, and community events can be used to present information as well as allow residents and businesses to generate ideas and share concerns with the local leaders.