

LAKE PEPIN

Committee debates stricter lake standards

Legislation would apply only seasonal phosphorus limits

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ST. PAUL — Environmentalists spoke out Monday against a bill that would make Minnesota's standards for phosphorus in Lake Pepin less strict than those in Wisconsin.

The measure seeks to establish phosphorus standards that apply only from June to September, during the growing season. Wisconsin recently passed phosphorus standards that would apply year-round. Environmentalists who testified before the Senate Committee on State Government Innovation and Veterans argued these tougher standards are needed to protect Lake Pepin's water quality.

"We need to make these (wastewater facilities) work to take phosphorus out — not to allow them three-month standards. We need year-round standards," said Gary

Botzek, testifying on behalf of the Minnesota Environmental Partnership.

But supporters of the bill say that year-round standards would be extremely costly for cities in the state that operate wastewater treatment plants.

Two-thirds of the state's wastewater drains into the Mississippi River, which feeds into Lake Pepin.

Elizabeth Wefel, a lobbyist for the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities, said additional standards would put a tremendous burden on cities. For cities with newer wastewater treatment facilities, it could mean hundreds of thousands of dollars in additional maintenance and operation costs. For cities with older facilities, it might require millions be spent on building projects to meet the standard.

"Ultimately, these added costs would be passed along to taxpayers and businesses," Wefel said.

Excessive phosphorus in lakes can cause algae blooms and excessive weed growth, which can hurt water quality

and have a negative effect on fish, animals and plant life.

If the two states can't come to agreement on a single phosphorus standard, the more rigid one prevails.

The bill's sponsor, Sen. John Pederson, R-St. Cloud, said public utility officials have told him that the Wisconsin phosphorus standards would be extremely costly. Sen. John Howe, R-Red Wing, a co-sponsor of the bill, said the Wisconsin standards would cost the city of Red Wing \$100,000.

Pederson wants the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to negotiate with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in favor of the seasonal standard.

The committee voted 8-5 to refer the bill to the Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee.

Sen. Charles Wiger, DFL-Maplewood, said he is deeply concerned about what lower standards could mean for Lake Pepin's future.

"Lake Pepin, as everyone knows, is a precious Minnesota resource," he said.

