

The Columbus Dispatch

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2006

Ohio's rivers focus of much planning, little monitoring

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The Ohio EPA says it's so bogged down with creating plans to clean up waterways across the state that it will take years to see if those plans work.

For example, a plan to protect the ecologically sensitive Big Darby Creek should be in place this year. But tests to measure the plan's effectiveness aren't scheduled until 2021.

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency said it got into this predicament after several environmental groups sued to speed up the complex plans, considered vital to restoring and protecting Ohio streams.

A report the agency released yesterday

shows the EPA is well on its way to meeting and surpassing goals set in a 2004 court settlement.

But the time lapse between plans and tests has some groups concerned. The Olentangy River isn't scheduled for tests until 2018.

"There are significant changes in the (Olentangy) that are going on right now," said Bob Frey, a geologist and member of the advocacy group Friends of the Lower Olentangy Watershed.

Trinka Mount, an Ohio EPA coordinator, said the agency is moving as fast as it can.

"If we directed all of our resources to a few places, we'd get to those places more

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often," Mount said. "But we wouldn't be covering the whole state."

The Ohio Environmental Council, the National Wildlife Federation and the League of Ohio Sportsmen filed a suit in 2001 that complained the state was moving too slowly in cleaning up creeks and rivers.

A settlement called for having 50 plans in place by 2007. Each plan calculates a maximum load of pollutants a stream can handle and includes methods to reduce pollution that exceeds those levels.

The plans are based on tests that gauge a waterway's quality, including the fish, mussels and insects that live in it. The EPA's testing process is praised by environmental groups.

Mount said the agency is looking beyond the settlement to get a plan in place for every stream in the state. That's about 110 plans. She said her staff is able to complete about five to six plans a year.

Keith Dimoff, deputy director of the Ohio Environmental Council, said the state should regularly monitor streams.

"This is how we would check whether all these efforts pay off or not," Dimoff said.

One of the state's most public efforts involves Big Darby Creek, a state and national scenic river that harbors 37 rare and endangered species of fish and mussels.

In 2002, the agency ordered a freeze on most new construction projects in portions of western Franklin County that the Darby drains. The freeze was intended to help protect the stream while the agency developed its plan, which

should be finalized later this year.

Randall Edwards, spokesman for the Ohio chapter of the Nature Conservancy, said streams threatened by urban sprawl, such as the Darby and Olentangy, should be monitored.

"If there's not enough manpower to do it, then they need additional resources," Edwards said.

Frey said he hopes the agency finds ways to monitor endangered streams more often. Mount said her office should be able to respond to dramatic changes.

Plans and schedules can change dramatically depending on an agency's funding from one budget to the next. The Ohio EPA plans to spend about \$6.8 million on stream plans this fiscal year.

"This is a projection based on the resources we have available today," Mount said.

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Long wait time for tests

Tests that can measure and begin efforts to protect Ohio streams from pollution may not be performed for years. The following shows the years in which the Environmental Protection Agency plans to survey water quality and wildlife in three central Ohio streams.

Scioto River (headwaters): 2009

Olentangy River: 2018

Big Walnut Creek: 2020

Big Darby Creek: 2021

Source: Ohio EPA