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Our Opinion

In defense of clean water

While environmental activists and state officials quarrel over water protection rules, Indiana's waterways fight for their lives.

It is up to the federal government to judge the Indiana Department of Environmental Management's claim that it's doing a first-rate job of keeping discharge permits away from polluters, contrary to the assertions of IDEM's critics. But the verdict's in on the condition of lakes, ponds, streams and rivers where Hoosiers swim, fish and draw their drinking water.

As with virtually every other index of environmental quality, Indiana ranks with the nation's worst in terms of E. coli bacteria contamination, no-fishing advisories and total "impaired" water as classified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Against this backdrop, the EPA is being asked, by the Hoosier Environmental Council and the Chicago-based Environmental Law and Policy Center, to give IDEM a choice: Beef up its enforcement of the federal Clean Water Act or see the feds take over.

The complainants say discharge approvals by IDEM are pretty much a formality and that the process is pocked with exemptions. IDEM disputes that. But there's no dispute about the absence so far of "anti-degradation implementation" rules, which the Clean Water Act mandated in 1972.

Indiana got around to adopting those rules in 1997 for the Great Lakes basin alone. In 2007, the Daniels administration, in consultation with HEC and others, got to work on statewide rules, which now are in the public review stage. The environmentalists say they won't pass EPA muster.

On the anti-degradation issue and the overall question of water stewardship, we await a lengthy process of EPA deliberation. In the meantime, a state agency that has undergone substantial budget cuts, and an administration that is publicly committed to speeding up the permitting process, must give themselves a review.

The test of whether a regulator of water, air and soil has been doing things right is the quality of that water, air and soil. For the average Hoosier who breathes air, drinks water and eats crops, paper compliance with the law is an academic matter. If the feds determine non-compliance and step into the state's business, upward movement in those rankings is hardly guaranteed. Commitment by state government, in cooperation with environmentalists, scientists and forward-looking business representatives, is the only path to ecological -- and economic -- health. The journey starts with urgency, and stalls with self-justification.
