River Water Quality Summary for the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area

- Background -

Metropolitan Council Environmental Services monitors water quality in the region to protect public health and the environment, in compliance with state laws and the federal Clean Water Act (CWA). The goals of the CWA are to eliminate the discharge of pollutants into navigable waters and to attain, whenever possible, water clean enough to support fish, shellfish, wildlife and recreational activities. Historically, the terms "fishable" and "swimmable" waters have been used to describe the goals of the CWA. This report presents an annual "snapshot" for water quality in four reaches of the major metro-area rivers (upper and lower Mississippi, Minnesota and St. Croix) using several common environmental indicators. These indicators include the amount of dissolved oxygen present as an indicator of "fishable" conditions; bacterial levels as an indicator of "swimmable" conditions; and turbidity and phosphorus as indicators of both. These indicators are described in more detail below.

Water quality is affected by the combined impacts of point and nonpoint sources of pollution. River systems are quite resilient to moderate changes; however, extreme conditions can threaten a river's ability to support aquatic life. To provide a historical perspective, 2003 information is compared to ten-year average values during the 1994-2003 period.

River monitoring is conducted at strategically located sampling stations. Samples are collected four times per month during the open-water season (March through October) when more recreational activities are expected and the river environment changes more quickly, and twice per month during the remainder of the year.

Variable or Indicator	General Significance
Precipitation and River Flow	*Precipitation results in runoff and carries nonpoint source pollution from urban and agricultural areas to area rivers. It also increases river flow, which may affect fate and effects of pollutants in the river system. Regional precipitation is measured at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, and is a good indicator of significant runoff events because of its central location, even though actual precipitation varies throughout the metro area. During wet periods, nonpoint source pollutants are carried to rivers, and higher flows can also cause streambank erosion, habitat destruction and flooding. During dry periods, flows may be too low to sufficiently dilute pollution, sediment deposition increases, and habitat quality may be adversely affected.*
Dissolved Oxygen Fishable	*Living organisms need oxygen to survive, and the amount of dissolved oxygen in a river determines whether it can support aquatic life. Dissolved oxygen is reduced through the decomposition of organic material in the water, which may come from wastewater treatment plants or agricultural and urban nonpoint source runoff. Dissolved oxygen levels of 5 mg/l and greater are generally adequate to support aquatic life. However, fish consumption advisories may exist due to other contaminants (mainly PCBs and mercury).*
Bacteria Swimmable	*One measure of a river's recreational value is its suitability for swimming (i.e. all water contact activities), and one measure of this is the level of fecal coliform bacteria. These bacteria are found in the wastes of warm-blooded animals, including people, dogs and cattle, and may indicate the presence of potentially dangerous pathogens such as typhoid fever, hepatitis and dysentery. Bacteria levels that average below 200 colonies/100 ml per month are generally considered to be safe for human contact.*
Turbidity Fishable/Swimmable	*Turbidity (cloudiness) is caused by particles in the water. These particles may harm aquatic life by decreasing light available for plant growth, increasing water temperature, clogging gills of aquatic inhabitants and covering habitat. Turbidity is also related to swimmability because it is closely correlated to user perception of water quality. Low turbidity (at or below 25 NTU) indicates good water quality.*
Phosphorus Fishable/Swimmable	*Aquatic plants provide food, oxygen and habitat for river organisms. However, an excess of plant growth can lead to unsightly algae blooms, and oxygen depletion and odor upon decaying, making the water unpleasant for recreational activities and unsuitable for aquatic life. Phosphorus, a common component of wastewater treatment plant discharges and urban and agricultural runoff, can stimulate excessive plant growth when levels in rivers are too high.*

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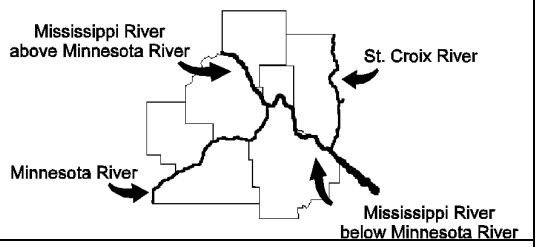
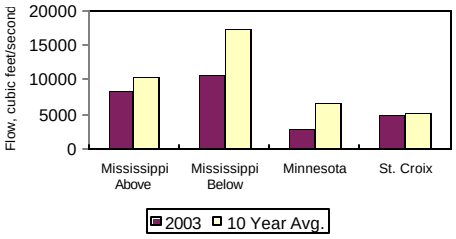
- 2003 -



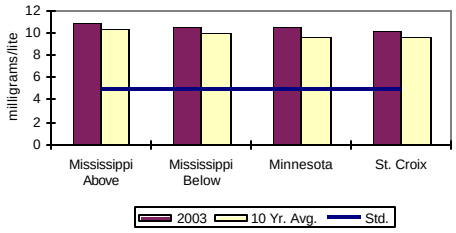
Precipitation and River Flows

2003 was the driest year since 1998, according to the State Climatology Office. Total precipitation in the Twin Cities Metro Area was more than 6.5 inches below normal during 2003. April, May and June were wetter than normal, but between July 15 and the end of December, less than half the normal precipitation fell. As a result of the overall drought conditions, river flows in the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers were noticeably lower than the 10-year averages, while flows in the St. Croix River were slightly lower than the 10-year average.



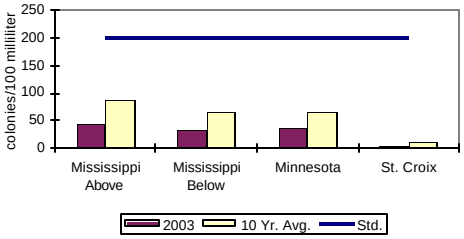
Dissolved Oxygen

Annual average dissolved oxygen levels in all three rivers were higher than the water quality standard and the 10-year averages in 2003. High oxygen levels provide healthy conditions for a diverse fish population, indicating fishable conditions. Higher dissolved oxygen levels indicate better water quality.



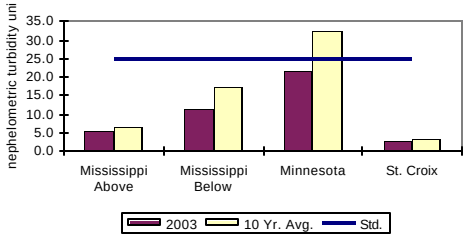
Fecal Coliform Bacteria

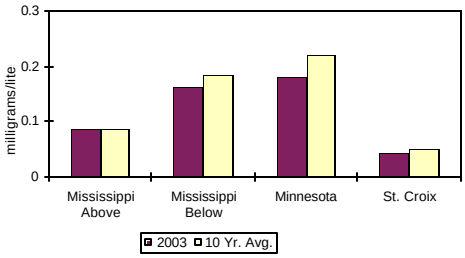
Annual average bacteria levels in all three rivers were lower than the water quality standard and the 10-year averages in 2003, indicating favorable conditions for swimming. Lower than average levels in the Twin Cities Metro Area rivers may be indicative of decreased precipitation and, therefore, decreased nonpoint source runoff during the latter half of the year. Lower bacteria values indicate better water quality.



Turbidity

Annual average turbidity levels in the Mississippi, Minnesota and St. Croix Rivers were lower than the water quality standard and the 10-year averages in 2003, due to decreased precipitation and runoff, indicating conditions that support fishing and swimming. Lower turbidity levels indicate better water quality.



Phosphorus

Annual average phosphorus levels in the Metro Area Rivers in 2003 were at or below the 10-year averages. Although there is no water quality standard for phosphorus in rivers, too much phosphorus in the water can lead to impairment of fishable and swimmable conditions, due to algae growth.