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AP Iowa News Story

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Report says many contaminants in Iowa's waterways are not tested

By AMY LORENTZEN
Associated Press Writer

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) -- The state's waters aren't tested for many chemicals and microorganisms that may hurt the environment and human health, according to a new study by a public research group.

The Mount Vernon-based Iowa Policy Project reports that many of the compounds - including prescription drugs, hormones, dyes, insect repellents, detergents, preservatives and cosmetics - are not routinely monitored under state and federal laws, including the Clean Water Act.

The nonprofit, nonpartisan group said the "emerging contaminants" need further study, especially since most research has focused almost exclusively on conventional contaminants such as nitrates, pesticides and arsenic.

"In the last few years other potential chemicals of concern have been detected," said the report's co-author Doug Schnoebelen, a research hydrologist for the U.S. Geological Survey, and geoscience and engineering professor at the University of Iowa.

Emerging contaminants, he said, can be synthetic or naturally occurring chemicals or microorganisms that are not commonly monitored. Some may act together or even combine to contaminate the environment.

The group examined a U.S. Geological Survey project at Fourmile Creek near Ankeny that began in 2001. The study looked at some emerging contaminants to gauge their levels near urban areas. It found three emerging contaminants upstream of the Ankeny wastewater treatment plant and 31 downstream.

The report said the Ankeny plant was meeting all current government regulations - much like other plants that discharge wastewater into streams across the nation.

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"I don't think that Fourmile Creek at Ankeny is that unique, and I think that if we looked at other places we would find these same compounds," said Mary Skopec, a watershed monitoring supervisor for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

She said critics might wonder why time is being spent on emerging contaminants while officials struggle to deal with other regulated pollutants, including nutrient runoff from farms. But, she said, it's better to be in front of any potential problems.

"It's important for us to have this information early so that we're not caught unaware if something does show up as a health risk," she said.

The USGS continues to study Fourmile Creek to understand how the compounds occur and any effect they may have on aquatic ecosystems.

"Detrimental effects to organisms from emerging contaminants may be subtle and go unnoticed until some cumulative threshold is reached," study co-author Dana Kolpin, a USGS research hydrologist and chief of the emerging contaminants project, said in a statement.

The study also addresses how emerging contaminants may affect human and animal endocrine systems. It points to a study that shows a chemical found in laundry and dish detergents can affect fish endocrine systems, disrupting reproduction and growth.

Schnoebelen said another concern is whether antibiotics that reach the waters through human and animal urine and feces may contribute to antibiotic resistance and reduce algae diversity and soil microbial activity.

"Bacteria's resistance to antibiotics may also increase with the glut of new products available that include anti-microbial disinfectants such as liquid soaps, dishwasher powders and plastics," he said.

David Osterberg, Iowa Policy Project executive director, said the report shows that more work, such as that at Fourmile Creek, needs to be conducted.

"Science is just beginning to understand emerging contaminants and their effects," he said.

On the Net:

Iowa Policy Project: <http://www.iowapolicyproject.org/>

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