NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

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Tompkins County Water Resources Council
121 East Court St
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May 15, 2023

Dear Cynthia Brock:

Thank you for your letter to Commissioner Seggos about your concerns regarding water quality and the development of the Cayuga Lake TMDL.

In 2002, the Cayuga Lake Southern End segment was listed on the NYSDEC Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 303(d) list of impaired waterbodies due to phosphorus impairment. Consequently, a TMDL for phosphorus was drafted for Cayuga Lake in its entirety, to address this impairment on the Southern End and protect the remaining lake areas. Water quality monitoring and subsequent Cayuga Lake model was completed in 2013 and submitted to DEC in 2017. The draft Cayuga Lake TMDL was released for a 90-day public comment period in April 2021, during which time the DEC received over 500 public comments and suggestions. The review and response to public comments is currently ongoing. The TMDL is anticipated to be finalized this summer.

The pollutant of concern for the Cayuga Lake TMDL is total phosphorus. The TMDL was developed according to Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 303(d) which requires states to develop a TMDL for a waterbody/segment that does not meet the water quality standard for a specific pollutant. TMDLs identify sources of the pollutant of concern and include appropriate loading reductions of the identified pollutant so that the waterbody/segment will meet water quality standards, defined as the targets in the TMDL.

Currently, Cayuga Lake has two additional planning and research documents available to address harmful algal blooms (HABs) or other water quality concerns: (1) the Cayuga Lake HABs Action Plan (https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/water_pdf/cayugahabplan.pdf), and (2) the Cayuga Lake Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan (https://www.cayugalake.org/the-watershed/restoration-protection-plan/).

The HABs Action Plan for Cayuga Lake, published in 2018, identified the contributing factors that can fuel algal blooms, implementation recommendations, and new monitoring and treatment technologies. Grant applications that propose eligible projects that support the recommendations from HABs Action Plans receive priority points in several current NYS grant programs, including the Water Quality Improvement Project (WQIP) Program (https://www.dec.ny.gov/pubs/4774.html).

The Cayuga Lake HABs Action Plan implementation has been utilized to secure funding from various grants since its publication. Additionally, many of the phosphorus reduction recommendations in the draft TMDL echo the recommendations identified in the HAB Action Plan.

Substantial watershed implementation progress has been made in the Cayuga Lake watershed since the completion of the Cayuga Lake Model. Since 2013, numerous best management practice (BMP) and mitigation projects, totaling more than $25 million dollars have been implemented throughout the Cayuga Lake watershed to improve or protect water quality. Projects include agricultural nutrient BMPs, land acquisition for the protection of source water, streambank stabilization, culvert replacements, ditch hydroseeding, septic pump outs, and sediment and erosion control practices. Detailed project summaries can be found in annual Regional Economic Development Council Awards booklets (2022 example: https://regionalcouncils.ny.gov/2022-awards).

Please note, the above summary of implementation progress does not include substantial NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets (DAM) funding to the Soil & Water Conservation Districts for implementation of the Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) program, the implementation of numerous agricultural BMPs on local farms through other state or federal grant programs, the funds distributed through the Finger Lakes - Lake Ontario Watershed Protection Alliance (FLLOWPA) for the six counties within the Cayuga Lake watershed, or the successful DEC-Agriculture and Markets eastern cover crops program.

DEC has monitoring programs designed to monitor and evaluate water quality in the lake and its watershed (Rotating Integrated Basin Studies (RIBS) program: https://www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/30951.html). Data from DEC's monitoring programs are available at the Division of Water (DOW) Online Monitoring Portal (https://nysdec.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=692b72ae03f14508a0de97488e142ae1). Since 2017, the DEC's volunteer citizen lake-science program, Citizens Statewide Lake Assessment Program (CSLAP), has been active in multiple locations in Cayuga Lake. As part of the data collection procedure, volunteers collect important information on lake clarity, algae, and nutrient levels. These critical data will allow us to assess the status of the lake into the future as the TMDL is implemented to ensure that watershed remediation actions are working effectively. The most current Cayuga Lake water quality data can be found at the DOW here: https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/c32878596a0a47deb5f97ea5e07ec9c5.

DEC greatly appreciates your continued interest in these environmental issues and in water quality in Cayuga Lake. DEC will continue moving forward to address water quality concerns in cooperation with local stakeholders to protect the New York's waters. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Anthony Prestigiacomo at (315) 426-7452 or via email at anthony.prestigiacomo@dec.ny.gov.

Sincerely,

Karen M Stainbrook
Director, Bureau of Water Resource Management
Division of Water

CC: Thomas Vigneault
Dereth Glance