Water Update
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The Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement (GLWQA) turns 50 years old this year. The GLWQA provides Canada and the United States with a framework for protecting the water quality of the Great Lakes. The activities associated with the GLWQA are vast and not all have the same potential to affect agriculture or MACA members. I do regularly track those aspects of GLWQA activities related specifically to agricultural nutrient runoff and to what is referred to as chemicals of mutual concern (CMC). The Great Lakes Executive Committee (GLEC) is the body tasked with administering the GLWQA. The GLEC is developing a draft status report that has been sent out to all GLEC members for comment. The GLWQA requires that status reports occasionally be provided. This is just the 3rd status report which is being developed on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the GLWQA. The U.S. members of the GLEC include nearly 100 individuals from various U.S. federal and state agencies as well as tribes, cities, and commissions. The GLEC has also granted 'observer' status to 12 organizations. Representing MACA, I serve as one of the 12 observers. The other 11 observers include The Nature Conservancy, the National Wildlife Federation as well as state universities and other non-government organizations (NGOs). I and the other observers have access to preliminary reports and have limited participation in GLEC meetings. Therefore, I can read the draft report, but I cannot provide official comment.

So, after reading the 100+ pages of the status report, I actually feel it did a fairly good job summarizing the current status of GLWQA implementation. Regarding the goal of addressing CMCs, the report reaffirms the goal of the Lakes being free from substances that may negatively impact the integrity of the Lakes. It discusses efforts to coordinate research, monitoring and surveillance activities to identify potential chemicals of emerging concern. It also points to fish consumption as a major exposure to CMCs. You may recall I have provided updates in the past where I discuss our concerns of how EPA utilizes excessive safety margins in relation to water quality and the chemicals found in fish tissue. These safety margins assumptions such as someone eating large volumes of fish every day, 7 days a week. How the agencies use this data still bears monitoring.

Regarding nutrient runoff, the goal of the GLWQA is that the Lakes be free from nutrients that enter the water as a result of human activities and in amounts that promote growth of algae that interfere with aquatic ecosystem health or human use of the ecosystem. It discusses research and monitoring being done or needed to improve our understanding of factors affecting algae growth and to support the development of phosphorus reduction targets, where required. The report acknowledges the many agricultural research projects that are underway to improve understanding of how phosphorus moves and how effectively BMPs can manage nutrient losses.

The report states that the highest-priority activity regarding the issue of nutrients is the implementation of the plan to reduce phosphorus loads to Lake Erie by 40% (7.3 million pounds). The bulk of this reduction is coming from agricultural sources. EPA currently projects there was a 34% reduction of phosphorus going into Lake Erie by 2020. Obtaining the 40% will come from monitoring of phosphorus loads in tributaries and watersheds and investing in research and demonstration initiatives to improve knowledge of best management practices (BMPs). The report mentions many state specific initiatives. In particular, it mentions the state of Ohio is developing a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for the Maumee River which is a major river which outlets into the Great Lakes.

Finally, climate change is a focus for many these days. The report discusses efforts to evaluate dozens of climate change models. Current results are indicating that regional climate models have biases when compared to global climate models. The report suggests that both models have high uncertainty in their future projections and that users should be aware of biases before relying on their data for future planning. Work is being done to create a climate model report card that should provide technical information about how specific climate models are constructed and offer a performance evaluation.

All this bears watching. Rest assured, MACA will continue to watch what is happening in the Great Lakes and will keep you informed.

Each month Steve provides an update on a current water issue. Please share this information with the appropriate people in your company. ~ Bonnie McCarvel, MACA Executive Director.