



Upper Mississippi River Basin Association (UMRBA)

## 2007 Water Quality Program Report

Protecting Water Quality Through Interstate Cooperation



Mississippi River Pool 19 at Burlington, Iowa  
(Photo courtesy USGS)

### Background: Water Quality and the Upper Mississippi River

Protecting the water quality of the Upper Mississippi River (UMR) is important in sustaining the multiple uses of the River as a diverse ecosystem, water supply, recreational area, and commercial artery. While progress has been made in improving the River's water quality since the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, challenges still exist in addressing issues such as reducing nutrient and sediment inputs, dealing with emerging contaminants, and preserving and protecting water quality gains made to date. The UMR also faces unique challenges as a shared border water under the jurisdiction of many States and Federal authorities, and as a physically complex ecosystem of pools, side channels, and backwaters that is also managed for commercial navigation.

### The Role of the UMRBA and Its Water Quality Work Groups

The UMRBA was established in 1981 by the Governors of the five States that border the Upper Mississippi River to facilitate dialogue and cooperative action among the States and to work with Federal agencies on inter-jurisdictional river programs and policies. The UMR States and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have recognized the value of coordinating Clean Water Act programs on the UMR and have looked to the UMRBA as the appropriate organization to assist in this collaboration.

In particular, UMRBA's Water Quality Task Force, composed of State and EPA staff, addresses technical and regulatory water quality issues while the Executive Committee, which is composed of water quality administrators from each of the five State environmental protection agencies and two EPA Regions, provides policy-level coordination on Upper Mississippi River water quality issues.

Through these efforts, the UMRBA has become the primary venue for the discussion of improved Clean Water Act implementation on the Upper Mississippi River among State environmental agencies and EPA Regions, and was recognized in a recent National Research Council report for its coordination efforts (see sidebar).

"UMRBA has sponsored discussions and studies on many water quality issues. At a strategic level, the UMRBA represents an interstate commitment to cooperation on river management issues."

-From the National Research Council's 2007 Report, *Mississippi River Water Quality and the Clean Water Act: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities*

### UMRBA Water Quality Program Accomplishments and Activities

**Report: *Organizational Options for Interstate Water Quality Management on the Upper Mississippi River***

In December 2006, the UMRBA released a report entitled *Organizational Options for Interstate Water Quality Management on the Upper Mississippi River*. In it, the States recommend the development of an interstate water quality agency by building upon the UMRBA. In addition, the report includes the results of a year-long research effort that examined how interstate commissions in other parts of the country

function, the potential for securing UMR-specific funding under the Clean Water Act, and different organizational options that could be employed on the UMR. The UMRBA Water Quality Executive Committee was chartered as a direct outgrowth of the report's recommendations. Subsequent to the publication of the report, the Executive Committee has undertaken a number of efforts to seek support for the implementation of the report's recommendations, including outreach to members of Congress and meetings with leaders at EPA.

### ***Issue Paper: Sediment-Related Water Quality Criteria for the Upper Mississippi River***

The Water Quality Task Force completed a year-long examination of options regarding sediment-related water quality criteria by publishing its February 2007 issue paper "Sediment-Related Water Quality Criteria for the Upper Mississippi River." The paper includes three primary recommendations for further action: 1) a guidance document should be created for the UMR States to use in developing criteria, which would incorporate the Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee's recommendations for protection of submerged aquatic vegetation on portions of the River; 2) a white paper should be developed that further examines sedimentation (bedded sediment) issues on the UMR; and 3) a list of research needs should be maintained to help guide further investigations in this area.

### ***Examination of Designated Uses Under the Clean Water Act***

In May 2007, the Water Quality Task Force and Water Quality Executive Committee launched an ambitious project to explore the possibility of refining the "designated uses" assigned to the UMR to improve protection of the River's water quality. Designated uses (also known as "beneficial uses"), along with water quality criteria and an anti-degradation policy, compose States' water quality standards.

The project began by examining the current designated uses assigned to the River by each State, focusing on the aquatic life uses. In June 2007, a proposal for creating habitat-specific aquatic life use sub-categories



**Backwater habitats are important in sustaining the UMR's fish populations.**  
(Photo courtesy USGS)

was developed. Such an approach would reflect the diversity of the River's habitats, similar to the approach successfully implemented on the Chesapeake Bay. The project, which the Task Force expects could span several years and involve communication with a broad range of UMR experts in ecology, water quality, and other sectors, will include: 1) development of a better understanding of the river's habitats among the UMR water quality regulatory community, including a "UMR habitats primer;" 2) exploring regulatory implications under the Clean Water Act; and 3) preparation of an actionable scope of work for the next 2-5 years, including a methodology for development of habitat-specific UMR aquatic life use sub-categories.

Beyond aquatic life uses, the Task Force also plans to examine other designated uses, such as those related to recreation and drinking water.

### ***Consultations on Assessments and Impaired Waters Listings for the UMR***

The Task Force provides a venue for the States to consult on their biennial water quality assessments of the UMR and preparation of their UMR "impaired waters list," as required under the Clean Water Act. These discussions have helped facilitate the exchange of data between States and have, in some cases, contributed to more consistent listings between States. The five UMR States are on different schedules for submittal of their reports to EPA. Thus, their 2007 consultations addressed issues related to both the 2006 reporting

cycle and the upcoming 2008 reporting cycle. The success of these consultations has been enhanced by adoption of a uniform set of interstate assessment reaches for the River that the States developed in 2003.

### ***Joint Governors' Statement on Upper Mississippi River Water Quality***

At the request of the UMRBA Board, the Governors of the UMR States issued a joint statement on August 2, 2007 expressing their support for coordinated implementation of the Clean Water Act and requesting federal resources to support the effort. The statement specifically identified UMRBA as a partner with the States (see sidebar) and included a request for dedicated funding within EPA's budget to support UMR efforts.

"We are committed not only to the protection of the River's water quality, but we are also committed to doing so in a coordinated manner.....We are therefore supporting the coordination of water quality monitoring, assessment, and standards for the Upper Mississippi River by the States of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin and the Upper Mississippi River Basin Association. This approach will allow the Clean Water Act to be implemented on the Upper Mississippi River in a more coordinated and consistent fashion than has ever been possible previously."

***-From the Statement of the Governors of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin on Water Quality Protection for the Mississippi River (August 2, 2007)***

## **Goals for UMRBA's Water Quality Program in 2008**

### ***➤Continue Progress on Designated Uses***

The Task Force will continue its efforts to determine the viability of establishing habitat-specific aquatic life use sub-categories for the UMR. Specifically, a UMR habitats "primer" is planned for January 2008, with the expectation that it will help inform the development of a scope of work.

### ***➤Implement Recommendations Regarding Fish Consumption Advisories and Sediment Criteria***

The Task Force continues to support the recommendations it made in its 2005 report on fish consumption advisories and its 2007 issue paper regarding sediment-related water quality criteria. In fact, it is possible that the designated uses project may facilitate implementation of some of these recommendations, as the States explore how best to define and protect the designated uses.

### ***➤Consult on 2008 Impairment Listings***

As the States move toward completion of their 2008 assessment and impaired waters listings, the Task Force will continue to provide a forum for interstate consultation on these lists. Topics likely to be considered for the 2008 cycle include the possibility of listings related to perfluorochemicals (PFCs) in Minnesota and potential listings of sediment and nutrient-related impairments in Wisconsin.

### ***➤Consider Emerging Contaminants***

In 2007, the Task Force helped facilitate a research effort including PFC sampling on the UMR. It is likely that PFCs and other emerging contaminants will continue to be a topic for the Task Force to address.

### ***➤Host Workshops: Ecosystem Restoration and the Clean Water Act on the UMR***

A set of two workshops will be held in April and June 2008 to bring together experts in Clean Water Act and ecosystem restoration programs on the UMR. These meetings will explore the policy and practice interfaces between these programs and seek to identify ways in which they can be better coordinated. They will be hosted by UMRBA, with funding provided by the EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

## Challenges Ahead

### *Capitalizing on Momentum, Moving from “Coordination to Creation”*

The past year has seen significant interest in UMR water quality coordination and the UMRBA’s role in coordination activities. In the next year, it will be critical to capitalize on this momentum by making significant progress on UMR water quality issues, in order to maintain the interest and support of the many individuals and organizations that are important to the effort. Also, as the UMRBA continues to enhance its water quality role, the activities of the Task Force may begin to move from simple coordination of agencies’ activities to the creation of tools that be used by these agencies in implementing their Clean Water Act programs. These “creation” activities represent a new area of work for the UMRBA and will require both expanded resources and a heightened awareness of the ability of the States to implement the tools that are created.

### *Scale of Water Quality Issues*

Historically, UMRBA’s focus has been on the mainstem of the UMR and the interjurisdictional issues inherent in managing a large border waterbody. However, the sources of many of the River’s water quality problems, such as nutrients and sediments, lie at least in part in the larger Basin. As the UMRBA continues its water quality work, it will become increasingly important to find ways to collaborate with other organizations and stakeholders throughout the Basin.

### *Need for Stable, Long-Term Funding*

Meeting UMRBA’s water quality goals and helping protect UMR water quality in more effective and collaborative ways will require a stable, long-term source of funding. In FY 2007, UMRBA’s water quality work was supported, in part, by \$42,100 in grants from EPA Region 5 and \$17,000 contributed by each State (\$85,000 total). While these contributions have been essential to continued progress, they pale in comparison to what is being invested by EPA in other nationally-significant waterbodies, such as the Chesapeake Bay or the Great Lakes. The five basin States are willing to do their part and have committed to working together. However, the federal government, which has a special role to play on interstate waters, must also provide support, a need highlighted by the National Research Council in its recent report on the Mississippi River and the Clean Water Act (see sidebar).

“The EPA should act aggressively to ensure improved cooperation regarding water quality standards, nonpoint source management and control, and other related programs under the Clean Water Act....The EPA should provide a commensurate level of resources to help realize this better coordination.”

-From the National Research Council’s 2007 Report, *Mississippi River Water Quality and the Clean Water Act: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities*

## For More Information

For more information about the UMRBA’s Water Quality Programs, please visit UMRBA’s water quality web page at <http://www.umrba.org/wq.htm> or contact Dave Hokanson, the UMRBA Water Quality Program Director (651-224-2880 or [dhokanson@umrba.org](mailto:dhokanson@umrba.org)).



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