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Heather Smith, baykeeper for the Watershed Center of Grand Traverse Bay



Special the Record-Eagle/ Watershed Center Board Member Rick Kane

Watershed Center Staff and volunteers sampling water quality in a small tributary of Elk Lake.

# CLEAN WATER ACT TURNS 50

*Restoration of Kids Creek one of the beneficiaries*

BY SALLY BARBER

Special to the Record-Eagle

**T**RAVERSE CITY — This month marks the 50th anniversary of the federal Clean Water Act.

The 1972 legislation signified a reckoning of society’s devastating impact on the natural environment.

“It was the beginning of the age in which we recognized water is paramount for our health,” said Heather Smith, baykeeper for the Watershed Center of Grand Traverse Bay.

Common practices were unthinkable by today’s standards. Municipalities dumped raw sewage into waterways. Unregulated industries unleashed chemical cocktails into the environment.

“It was a free-for-all,” Smith said.

Traverse City’s early manufacturers left an

inheritance of contamination impacting the Boardman River and watershed. According to Grand Traverse County, one of the substantial polluters was Traverse City Iron Works. The foundry was established in 1871 on the south bank of the Boardman between Union and Cass streets. The manufacturer operated for 100 years, dumping 80,000 cubic yards of foundry waste up to 20 feet deep at its riverbank site. Its waste material contained high levels of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, zinc and arsenic.

CWA was a turning point locally, within Michigan and nationally. Enacted, it instigated remediation, preservation and water protections targeting point sources including sewage and industrial discharge. The landmark legislation remains the chief law governing pollution control and water quality in America.

“As we celebrate CWA, we need to recognize progress, but also the gaps, like legacy contamination and the threats of everyday contaminants like PFAS and microplastics,” Smith said.

For a half-century CWA pumped funding into clean water projects. The restoration of Kids Creek in Traverse City is among local projects benefiting from CWA dollars. The Watershed Center has worked to restore Kids Creek to its natural free-flowing state since 2003 with CWA serving as one of multiple funding sources for the more than \$8 million remediation effort.

The Conservation Resource Alliance was founded in 1968, four years before enactment of CWA. The nonprofit serving northwest Michigan is part of a nationwide network of Resource Conservation and

**SEE WATER PAGE 4B**





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Watershed Center volunteer monitoring water temperature in a small tributary to Mitchell Creek.

# WATER

## The CWA turns 50

FROM PAGE 1B

Development Councils  
 “I have been with CRA 30 years,” said Amy Beyer, director of the regional center. “I remember when I started, we were all interested in new best practices.”  
 She said it took decades to learn how to protect water and learn how the watershed works.

Contamination to groundwater and watersheds by unregulated home septic systems is a CWA gap issue eventually addressed by some local authorities. It wasn’t until 1990 that Benzie County implemented an ordinance requiring septic system inspections whenever a home is bought, sold or transferred. Only last summer did the Leelanau County Board of Commissioners enact a countywide septic system inspection ordinance to prevent pathogens and other harmful substances from polluting groundwater and surface waters.

“We’ve come a long way, but sometimes these things take time and a lot of patience,” Beyer said.

It was CWA’s initial goal to render all of the nation’s waters fishable and swimmable by 1983 and for the end of water pollution discharges by 1985. The



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Watershed Center volunteers sampling water quality in a small tributary of Mitchell Creek.

legislative inadequacy in accomplishing the objective in Michigan is evidenced by data released in 2022 by the nonpartisan/nonprofit Environmental Integrity Project.

The organization reported 95 percent of 16,497 miles of assessed Michigan rivers and streams are too polluted to safely swim and 91 percent of assessed Michigan lakes and reservoirs are also impaired.

While CWA falls far short of its original objective, the National Wildlife Federation reports CWA succeeds in keeping 700 billion pounds of pollutants out of

the nation’s waters annually.

“Analyzing the success and failures over 50 years is complicated,” said Liz Kirkwood, executive director of the Traverse City-based water advocacy nonprofit FLOW (For Love of Water).

“Has there been adequate federal and state level funding? Sometimes there has and sometimes there hasn’t.”

CWA’s disappointing performance includes its failure to provide comprehensive regulations for agriculture runoff. Currently, controversy hangs over legal

definitions guiding CWA rules. A pending Supreme Court decision could impact wetland protections.

Kirkwood acknowledges that progress isn’t linear. As we mark CWA’s anniversary, she believes it’s important to reflect on where we’ve been and where we’re headed.

“In historic moments like this, it affords us the perspective we need and opportunity to take stock of the vision for the future of our waters,” she said. “What are we going to expect of ourselves for the future of our children?”