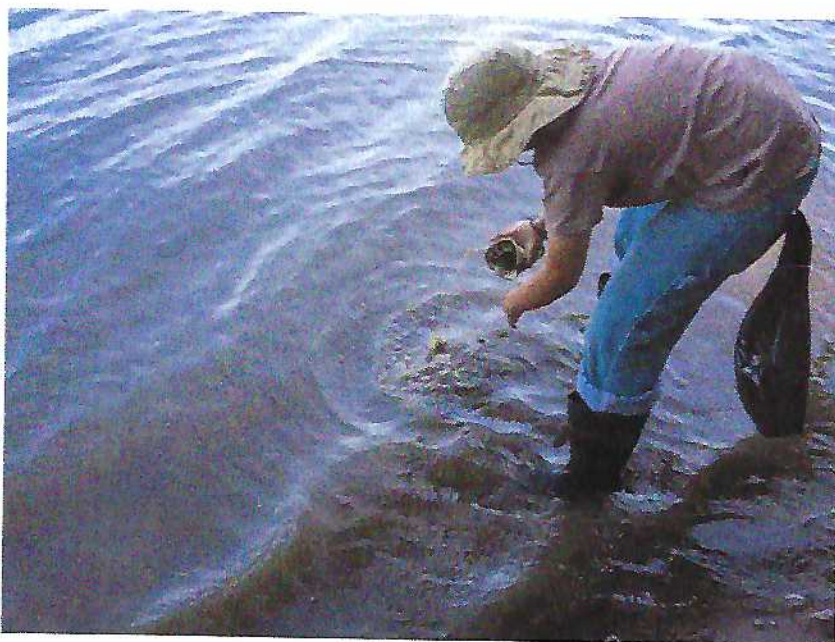


OPINION

Opinion: Future uncertain for Ohio River water quality

Rich Cogen, Opinion contributor Published 9:52 a.m. ET June 4, 2019



Christopher Martins, 10, of Houston, Texas, removes debris from the Ohio River shoreline at the Ohio River sweep at Fernbank Park in Saylor Park Saturday, June 18, 2016. The goal of the annual sweep is to improve habitat and water quality of the Ohio River. (Photo: *The Enquirer/Meg Vogel*)

We take water for granted. In the Midwest, water is plentiful, and conserving it is a financial consideration more than a supply decision. Of course, in some areas, too much water is becoming a regular flooding problem. In many cases, this can be addressed individually, as homeowners and businesses can move to new locations. So most of us don't see it as a problem that impacts our lives.

But water quality is a whole different story.

While water quality has vastly improved since the passage of the Clean Water Act in the 1970s, progress has plateaued for the Ohio River. Some aquatic species that were once plentiful can no longer be found in the river and others are far below their historic populations. Periodic health warnings persist. Vigilance and determination are required to continue to try to improve the water quality of the Ohio River, the source of drinking water to more than 5 million people and a much needed resource to thousands of businesses.

But the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission (ORSANCO), a regulatory agency formed by Ohio River states, wants to make its water quality standards – which many states adopt as part of their own – voluntary. Such a move will wreak regulatory havoc and erode public confidence in a major water source.

If the standards become voluntary, states will be free to adopt whatever standards they wish – ORSANCO's or their own. A significant risk is that upriver



Tiffany Schirmer, of YSI Inc., lowers a device with multiple water quality sensors into the river. (Photo: The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy)

states will adopt significantly weaker standards to accommodate local business interests, causing water quality for downriver states to degrade. This could lead to higher stress on aquatic life, affect recreation in the river and result in higher costs to ensure drinking water remains safe. Downriver states may need to litigate with upriver states whose standards are too weak to protect their downriver water quality. Furthermore, if states don't act when problems arise, then the burden will fall to citizens, who are far less equipped to seek redress.

Why does ORSANCO want to upset the apple cart? The agency is looking for ways to eliminate the public and political conflicts related to its standards it has found itself in over the past few years. In doing so, it would become solely a water quality monitoring and research agency.

ORSANCO's commissioners are well-meaning and thoughtful people appointed by Ohio River states and federal government. But, unfortunately, with ORSANCO's proposed move to make adoption of its standards voluntary for states, consistency and uniformity between upriver and downriver states could be thrown under the bus. If the agency chooses to go that route during its June 6 meeting in Covington, Kentucky, the result would be conflict among states, different compliance standards for businesses in different states and increased costs for utilities, businesses and consumers for treatment of increased pollution due to weaker standards.



Mark Atwood, of Westwood, collects trash with his sons Norman, 5, and Charlie, 3, at the Ohio River sweep at Fernbank Park in Sayler Park Saturday, June 18, 2016. The River sweep is Co-sponsored by the Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission (ORSANCO). (Photo: The Enquirer/Meg Vogel)

An easier, less politically charged and less risky option would be for ORSANCO to make the standards mandatory with reasonable exceptions that protect water quality and provide public transparency. This would require each state to adopt ORSANCO standards through their normal legal procedures. As members of ORSANCO, this should be a commitment each state willingly shares to ensure the protection of our most valuable resource.

Given the seriousness of the pending proposal, we hope ORSANCO's commissioners will decide on a course of action that does not shake the public trust that has been built up over several decades. It is imperative that Ohio River water quality continue to be protected and improved without risk of degradation for the benefit of current and future citizens of all Ohio River states.

Rich Cogen is executive director of the Ohio River Foundation.

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