

For general comment period (3 minutes)

Hello, my name is Maria Powell and I am the President of the Midwest Environmental Justice Organization. Our organization is currently funded by an EPA environmental justice grant to engage people from the Truax and Darbo neighborhoods in discussions and decisions about stormwater pollution that affects Starkweather Creek.

To understand the issues affecting the creek, several months ago we began investigating all of the available reports and data about it. We discovered a 2006 UW study showing a dramatic drop in water quality between above and below the airport—especially at the “golf ditch” that flows into the creek just east of Bridges Golf Course. A 2016 study also showed a sharp drop between above/below the airport, and the worst water quality at the golf ditch.

So we began to investigate what might be causing this drop in water quality, which occurs just west of the Truax apartments and East Madison Community Center, where our project work is centered. Looking at old reports and maps, we learned that there are several sites with soil and groundwater contamination that are likely entering Starkweather Creek via groundwater and/or stormwater runoff: Dane County airport, Truax Air National Guard base, the former Truax Landfill, the former Burke wastewater treatment plant (part of which is now Bridges Golf course). Stormwater runoff from all of these sites flows to Starkweather Creek via storm drains and ditches.

While reviewing old reports about these contaminated sites, in May a new report by the U.S. National Guard Bureau was released showing very high levels of perfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, in shallow soils and groundwater at the Truax Air National Guard site. PFAS are highly toxic compounds, associated with numerous serious health problems and cancer, and the preliminary testing at the Truax site found groundwater levels on the site thousands of times above existing EPA health advisory levels.

The Madison Water Utility has stated that there is a high likelihood that PFAS detected in drinking water Well 15 in Reindahl Park came from the Truax Air National Guard site, and possibly also the landfill. If the PFAS traveled underground as far as Reindahl Park, how far did it travel on the surface down stormdrains and Starkweather Creek?

All of these sites are part of “Truax Field,” owned by Dane County. As owner of the site, and stormwater permittee, Dane County can and should investigate these sources of contamination to Starkweather Creek water and fish. **We ask that you put Truax Field contamination (including PFAS and other contaminants) on the next Lakes & Watershed agenda to allow for a full discussion of the these issues.**

For budget comment period

The County’s 2017 “Equity and Inclusion Commitment Statement and Plan” states that “water is an equity issue” and that the “Lakes and Watershed Commission is concerned with protecting and improving water quality and ensuring that the Dane County residents have equitable access to water resources, programs, and policy development.” It states that Dane County will “understand the various ways in which county residents relate to water and the different contexts in which water is used.”

Relatedly, on the top of today’s Meeting Agenda, it advises, *“Consider: Who benefits? Who is burdened? Who does not have a voice at the table?” How can policymakers mitigate unintended consequences?”*

As our previous two speakers described, the trash and toxic contaminants running off into Starkweather Creek negatively affect low income and minority communities along it in a variety of ways—inhibiting safe, healthy interactions with the creek, causing contamination of fish that some of them eat, and more. Low income people, for a variety of systemic reasons, have less capacities and opportunities to learn about these important risk issues, or engage in decisions about them—so addressing the questions at the top of the agenda, they are “burdened” and their “voices are not at the table”. There are unintended negative consequences on their health and well-being. This is an environmental justice issue.

In this light, I’d like to speak to the budget recommendations under Public Safety Initiative, A—“Expanded beach health monitoring, education and public notification.” The budget recommendation document states that PHMDC assures compliance with state storm water regulations mandates for illicit discharge detection and elimination, and that this monitoring is critical for informing county-wide decision making. It describes health risks related to toxic blue-green algae blooms and pathogens, and recommends “increased funding for PHMDC to provide additional staff and supplies for collecting and processing more frequent sampling at beaches” and to improve communication with the general public, boaters, and anglers.

We support these recommendations. However, we also believe that the PFAS and other toxic contaminants running off the Truax Field sites pose significant public health risks, especially to low income communities, that should be monitored and mitigated by the county as owner of the site. The county and PHMDC have the authority to test these contaminants under current stormwater laws but aren’t doing so. We recommend that the budget include resources for testing these contaminants in Starkweather Creek water, sediments and fish.

Further, speaking to the “Enhanced Community Outreach and Education Initiative” item, we recommend that funding be provided for staff and resources to inform and engage the public—again, especially the most affected low income and minority communities along the creek-- about the contaminants affecting the creek and its fish.

Finally, we ask that Dane County, as owner of the land that the Truax ANG leases—ask the ANG to organize a public meeting to share and discuss the PFAs data from the site with the public—including appropriate, comprehensive outreach to assure the inclusion and engagement of the low income communities potentially most affected by this pollution.

Thank you.