OLA News

November 2004

Septic System Inspections

Inspections of septic systems around Otsego Lake will begin in 2005. All systems within 500 feet of the lake and 100 feet of the lake's tributary streams will be inspected and is in conformance with new regulations enacted in early 2004 under New York State Public Health Law. The new regulations are intended to protect Otsego Lake as a drinking water supply for the Village of Cooperstown and homes around the Lake.

In preparation for the 2005 inspections, an inventory of existing systems has been undertaken. As of the end of September, about 80% of the systems have been surveyed. Letters have been sent to owners of the remaining 20% with encouragement to participate in the survey. A blank survey and postage-paid envelope were included with the

Mud Invades Otsego Lake

Picture funded by OLA and provided by the SUNY-Oneonta Biological Field Station and Dr. Tom Gergel documenting mud carried into Otsego Lake by stormwater. See related story on pages 2 and 3. Look for more mud documentation in future OLA News.

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letter.

Overall, lakeside property owners have been cooperative in providing septic systems. Owners realize that the Lake is a precious resource, and that it must be protected. Taking steps to prevent problems is more effective than having to fix problems after damage has occurred. Periodic inspections and pump-outs are essential elements of a preventive maintenance program.

Following, in this article, is a discussion of the inspection process, including pre-inspection preparation by the homeowner, inspection procedures, and what to do if a septic system fails inspection.

In preparing for an inspection, homeowners need to locate their system, which could include some of the following: a septic tank, a pump tank, holding tank, aerobic system and an absorption field, also called a leach field. If the system is quite old, the system could simply be a hole in the ground called a "dry well". There are several ways to locate a septic tank, and it's best to use a plumbing contractor to do this. The general location of the tank can be determined by the direction of the sewer pipe leaving the house. A long flexible rod, known as a "snake", can be run through the sewer pipe clean-out to the tank to determine the distance from the house. If it is a metal tank, a metal detector can be used. Another method is to flush an electronic transmitter/locator down the toilet and find the tank using a radio receiver. Continued on page 4.

Simple Solutions may Help Reduce Lake Sediments & Weeds

We all know the problem. Sediments are filling in areas of Otsego Lake. They make it difficult for lake trout to spawn and they facilitate the growth of the noxious exotic plant, Eurasian water-milfoil. A big part of the solution may lie in the little things that happen *around* the lake.

Lake trout need clean gravel and cobbles to spawn.

Wes Tibbit's research with the Biological Field Station documents the fact that our lake trout are spawning in mere inches of lake water due to the lack of clean substrates in depths greater than one foot.

There are a few things you should know about lake weeds.

The most obnoxious weed in our lake is Eurasian water-milfoil. This plant generally grows in water three to 15 feet deep. In clear lakes, with zebra mussels, it can grow in deeper water. In many lakes, Eurasian water-milfoil forms a canopy which frustrates all recreational uses. In Otsego Lake we have a number of aquatic insects that eat the plant inhibiting canopy formation; nevertheless, in some areas of our Lake it grows to heights noticeable by swimmers.

It thrives in areas where lots of mud and soil are washed into the lake. Like asparagus, it has the ability to push through lots of soil to grow. Native aquatic plants, which are rarely a problem, can't push through the mud. In areas where a lot of mud and soil are being dumped into the lake, milfoil will take over and native aquatic plants will disappear.

We can use what we know about milfoil to help prevent the problem before it starts.

The first thing we can do is prevent erosion around the lake.

Erosion = Mud = Weed Problems

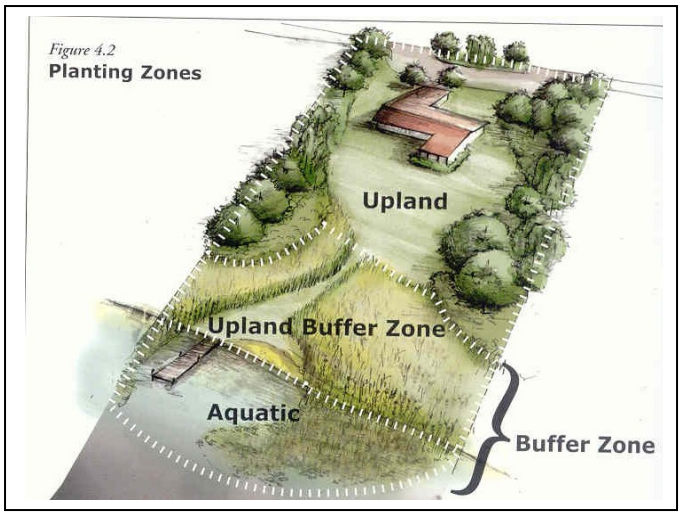
Milfoil thrives in lake locations where mud is dumped. As the rainwater flows through channels in ditches, constructions sites and driveways, the water in the lake becomes muddy. As this mud settles to the bottom, it stifles native plants and allows milfoil to grow without competition from native plants.

Matt Albright of the SUNY-Oneonta Biological Field Station tells us that almost 10,000 tons of mud are washed into Otsego Lake each year. (That's a lot of mud.)

How do we prevent mud from getting into the lake inhibiting trout spawning and fueling weed problems?

The easy answer is that we need to slow the water down before it gets to the lake. Fast moving water can carry a lot of mud and soil with it. If the water is blocked or slowed, much of the soil will settle out of the water.

- **Buffer Zones** are tall plants planted along stream banks and the lakefront. These tall grasses and shrubs slow the water down as it runs downhill. Much of the dirt will settle out of the water and be trapped in the taller plants. Many experts recommended buffer strips that were 40 to 60 feet wide although some maintain that 20 to 30 foot wide strips will do the job..



"Landscaping for Wildlife and Water Quality" by Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

- **Wetlands are natural buffer zones.** They naturally slow and clean the water before it gets into the lake. The more wetlands that are around the lake, the less mud that gets into the lake. This is why efforts to preserve wetlands around the lake are so important.

- **Construction sites should have silt fencing.** This is the short black plastic fence that surrounds large construction sites. It prevents the site's disturbed mud and dirt from getting into the lake.

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Simple Solutions may Help Reduce Lake Sediments & Weeds

Around Otsego Lake, local municipalities determine erosion control for construction sites smaller than one acre. Many municipalities with lakes require construction sites to put silt fencing and hay bales on all construction proximate to their lakes. We recommend regulations requiring effective erosion controls for any excavation within 1,000 feet of the lake or 500 feet of any stream. For examples of these regulations, see the NYSS Planning Federations recommendations at www.nypf.org.

- **Ditches can dump large amounts of dirt into the lake.** Ditches that are dug and left with bare dirt bottoms tend to wash out and dump dirt into the lake. Last summer, plumes of dirt could be seen going into the lake where creeks emptied ditch water.

  This doesn't mean ditches are bad. We all know that ditches are needed to keep roads, yards and houses from flooding. The key is to keep the ditches from washing out. This can be done in several ways. The ditch can be planted with grass sod whose roots will hold the bottom soil together, or large stones and silt fence material can be put into the bottom of the ditch so the bottoms don't wash out.

- **Sediment traps** can also be placed in road culverts to settle out heavier dirt. These traps have to be cleaned out, but prevent a lot of sediment from getting to the lake. Keep in mind:

  Erosion = Mud = Weed Problems

- **Breakwalls can add to the erosion problem.** Waves hitting smooth, vertical breakwalls, which have been built along the lake to prevent erosion, bounce off the smooth walls and erode the bottom and adjacent unprotected shorelines.

  Large stones and strong-rooted plants in front of, or instead of, a smooth breakwall will break up wave energy and diffuse it. This prevents the waves from bouncing back, ripping out the bottom and reintroducing nutrients into the lake.

If we all work together to lower the amount of mud getting into our lake, we will have an easier time with weeds and the lake trout will be able to spawn with less risk as they did in the past.

Many people fertilize lake weeds without knowing it.

One way that fertilizer gets into the lake is from lawn fertilizer. Rainwater carries fertilizers off the lawns around the lake when it rains. The fertilizers flow downhill into the ditches, creeks and streams and into the lake. Once they are in the lake, they help fuel algae and plant growth in the water just as they intensify grass growth on lawns.

Lawns don't need to be fertilized each year. A lawn left to grow 3 inches high and only fertilized as needed will help keep our lake less. . . green.

For more information on lake landscaping, erosion control, and more, visit some of these web sites:
www.cric.org/riparianbuffers.htm
www.co.cayuga.ny.us.wqma/greenthumbs
www.nysfola.org

We recommend Landscaping for Wildlife and Water Quality by Carrol Henderson for lakeside landowners looking to mitigate their impacts on the Lake. See http://mnlakes.org/main_dev/news/pdf/lakescaping.pdf

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Once the tank is found, signs of a nearby absorption field are sought. These include a depression or mound, greener grass, and/or a wetter area.

Homeowners will be contacted by the Watershed Coordinator to schedule an inspection. The Watershed Coordinator will confirm that homeowners know the location of their system and request that they contact a septage hauler for pumping out the tank at the time of the inspection. A list of septage haulers will be provided to homeowners. A pump-out will not be required if the tank has been pumped within the past two years.

At the scheduled inspection date and time, the homeowner, septage hauler (if needed), and inspector will meet at the system location. The inspection will proceed as follows: (1) The septic tank is opened and visually inspected; (2) A flow test is performed by opening plumbing fixtures in the house and observing flow through the tank; (3) The tank is pumped out, if needed; (4) The tank is inspected for cracks, corrosion, and other structural defects. Baffles are also checked. If a pump tank is used, it is inspected similarly to the septic tank. Similar inspections are also done for aerobic systems and holding tanks. Aerobic systems are also required to have an annual maintenance contract with an authorized service contractor. The absorption area will also be checked to determine its apparent function. Dye testing and other diagnostic testing may also be required depending in the circumstances.

If the septic system fails the inspection, the property owner will be issued a "Notice of Violation" by the municipality Codes Enforcement Officer. The Notice will specify the violation, corrective action required, and date by which corrective action must be completed. Homeowners will have up to a year to correct the problem. Following the issuance of a Notice of Violation, the Watershed Coordinator will contact the homeowner to discuss options for rectifying the problem. An assessment will be completed looking at what failed and the reason why. Appropriate corrective action will depend on site conditions including soils, slope, land area available, and distance from the Lake. Resources available for design (engineers) and construction (contractors) will be identified. To obtain approval for a lakeside septic system, the homeowner must take the following steps: (a) hire a licensed professional engineer to design the system, (b) submit the design to the municipality Codes Enforcement Officer, who will (c) submit the design to the Watershed Supervisory Committee for approval. Once the system is approved, a Construction Permit will be issued and the homeowner can proceed with system installation.

Homeowners with questions about their septic system can contact the Watershed Coordinator at 607-547-6057.

Article submitted by Win McIntyre, Watershed Coordinator

WANTED: No-Wake Zone Buoy Manager

A volunteer is needed for at least two half days each week April through October. This sainted individual should be a local resident at those times to facilitate coordination. Duties are fully negotiable, but could include:

- Managing buoy budget.
- Purchasing required supplies.
- Maintaining buoy records.
- Assembling buoys.
- Tending divers installing & maintaining buoys.
- Coordinating with Biological Field Station (BFS).
- Coordinating with Otsego County Soil & Water Conservation District.
- Coordinating with buoy contributors regarding new buoy locations.
- Coordinating, completing, & submitting applications for new buoy locations.

Interested parties should contact Paul Lord, BFS Divemaster/ Instructor at (607) 435-4989 or lordp@usa.net.

- Missed a meeting?
- Looking to purchase OLA apparel?
- Want to read OLA goals?

Go to your OLA website:

www.otsegolakeassociation.org

OLA Apparel

Look stylish while announcing your support for Otsego Lake!

Winter special: T shirts: $11.00 Denim shirts: $30.00

Call Scottie Baker (547-5336) to place your order.

Otsego Lake Association
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