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Summary of the Kentucky River Watershed Watch 2015 Water Sampling Results

Kentucky Water Resources Research Institute

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A Summary of the

Kentucky River Watershed Watch

2015 Water Sampling Results

Watershed Watch is a non-profit organization that was formed in 1997 to support a citizen monitoring effort, improve and protect water quality by raising community awareness, and promote the goals of the Clean Water Act and other water quality initiatives.

Report Produced by the

Kentucky Water Resources Research Institute

Funded by the

Kentucky River Authority

TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPENDIX A: FIGURES

APPENDIX B: TABLES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

This report documents the results of the 2015 Kentucky River Watershed Watch sampling effort, which was supported through funding and other contributions from the Kentucky River Authority, the Kentucky Division of Water, and the Virginia Environmental Endowment. Kentucky River Watershed Watch is a volunteer organization with the following goals:

- To provide current data on general water quality conditions to local stream based organizations working to protect their watershed
- To provide widespread screening for potential water quality problems to resource management agencies
- To provide auxiliary information to assist resource management agencies in meeting specific operational and management objectives
- To identify specific impacts to water quality through targeted observations and measurements

The 2015 sampling effort was conducted according to KRWW's Annual Workplan. (See "About," then "Work Plan" on organization's website at www.krww.org.) Detailed sampling results for 2015 and past years are also posted on the KRWW web site at http://www.krww.org.

2015 Sampling Site Overview

During 2015, Kentucky River Watershed Watch volunteers collected water samples from 163 sites at streams, rivers and lakes throughout the Kentucky River Basin, from Letcher County in the southeastern region to Carroll County in the northernmost region.

The Kentucky River Basin extends over much of the central and eastern portions of the state and is home to approximately 710,000 Kentuckians. The watershed includes all or part of 42 counties and drains over 7,000 square miles with a tributary network of more than 15,000 miles. A map of the watershed with the associated counties and sub-basins is shown in Figure 1 (see Appendix A for all figures). For the purpose of watershed management, the river basin has been subdivided into smaller sub-basins, or watersheds, using the USGS Hydrologic Unit Code (HUC) classification system. The sub-basins shown in Figure 1 are classified as HUC-8 watersheds and include the South, Middle and North Forks of the Kentucky River, the Central Kentucky River and Lower Kentucky River Basins. These areas can be further subdivided to outline smaller 11-digit HUC watersheds, which drain into the larger HUC-8 waterways, as shown in Figures 2- 4. Most KRWW samplers focus on these smaller watersheds when assessing and applying their water quality findings.

Water quality data were collected during four different events between May and September of 2015. A listing of the types of data collected, sampling dates, and number of samples is provided in the table below.

Sampling Event	Dates	# of Sites Sampled
Spring Herbicide Event	May 15-16, 2015	10 (NEW sites)
Synoptic Pathogen Event	July 9-12, 2015	101
Follow-Up Pathogen Event	August 6-11, 2015	109
Fall Nutrients/Chemistry Event	September 11-18, 2015	103
Metals Event	September 11-23, 2015	27

Table 1: Summary of 2015 Kentucky River Watershed Watch Sampling Events

The location of the 163 sites sampled in 2015 are shown in Figure 5. The 2015 sampling sites were highly concentrated in the central and southeastern regions of the Kentucky River Basin. An detailed index of the 2015 KRWW sampling sites is provided in Table B1 (see Appendix B).

2015 Flow Conditions

In order to provide a basis for interpreting the sampling results, it is important to understand the associated stream flow conditions. For example, data collected during low flow or dry conditions may be more indicative of the impact of "point source" discharges, mainly from pipes. Data collected following a storm may be more reflective of the impacts of "non-point" pollutant discharges, or pollution that is picked up from stormwater runoff.

An indication of the stream flow conditions during the sampling period may be obtained by examination of USGS (United States Geological Survey) stream flow records. To begin to understand streamflow variation during the 2015 sampling season, five separate USGS gaging stations were selected. Stream flow plots for each station, showing the flow rates during each of the different sampling efforts, are shown in Figures 6-10. (Daily stream flow values for these tables can be found on the USGS website at http://ky.water.usgs.gov). Figure 11 shows a comparison of flow levels at each of the 5 stations during the four separate sampling events.

The flow graphs illustrate the varying flow conditions present during the 2015 KRWW sampling season. Typically, lower flows indicate that a concurrent sampling event is more likely to capture point sources, such as sewage from leaking sanitary sewer infrastructure or straight pipes. Higher flows can indicate a recent precipitation event, and sampling may capture more nonpoint source contributions, such as septic system runoff, livestock waste from pastureland or fertilizer runoff from lawns or crops.

It is important to realize that generalizations about flow levels relative to pollutant concentrations can be complicated by a variety of factors, and as with most scientific investigations, will require more data to fine tune the meaning of the sampling results. Complicating factors include:

- Higher flows can mobilize pollutants that have accumulated in the stream, raising their concentrations.
- Higher flows can cause sanitary sewer overflows that can increase pollutants (i.e., pathogens, nutrients).
- Long term sampling results help explain connections between elevated pollutant levels and higher water volumes. For example, if the measured concentration is lower during high flows is this due to dilution or have the pollutant sources actually been reduced? If the measured concentration is higher during higher flows, is this due to stormwater runoff carrying more pollutants into the stream, or are instream pollutants (perhaps in the stream sediments) being mobilized by the higher flows?

Regardless, it is important to consider flow levels, as well as flow rates and precipitation records, when evaluating the meaning of water sampling results.

Spring Sampling Event: Moderately high flows were observed at the time of the Spring Sampling Event in May 2015. However, 48-hour rainfall recordings were zero to minimal, so it is unlikely that this sampling event captured runoff sources of pesticides.

Synoptic Pathogen Sampling Event: The flows during the first (synoptic) pathogen sampling in July were the highest of all sampling events, except at the North Fork Kentucky River station (headwaters region). Since rainfall was reported leading up this sampling event, higher E. coli readings could be attributed to runoff (nonpoint source) contributions.

Follow-Up Pathogen Sampling Event: Flows were generally lower during the second (follow-up) pathogen sampling event, with less recently occurring rainfall. Recent precipitation reported by samplers may again show that some of the higher E. coli levels could be due to runoff pollution.

Fall Sampling Event: In general, lower flows were observed across the basin during the fall nutrient/chemical/ metals sampling event in September. However, the streamflow readings in the North Fork, Wolf Run and South Elkhorn stations show that storms occurred a few days prior to sampling, which could have flushed a lot of pollutants from the streams, thus possibly resulting in lower readings of some water quality indicators.

CHAPTER 2: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Physical/Chemical Field Data

General physical/chemical field data (dissolved oxygen, pH, water temperature, observed flow level, recent rainfall and conductivity) were collected at each sample site during the four separate basin wide sampling periods. A summary of the physical/chemical data collected during this period is provided in Table B2.

Dissolved Oxygen

A dissolved oxygen value less than 5.0 mg/L is problematic for aquatic organisms, causing increased susceptibility to environmental stresses, reduced growth rates, mortality and an alteration in the distribution of aquatic life. The normal range for dissolved oxygen in freshwater streams is between 6.5 mg/L and 8.5 mg/L.

Dissolved oxygen is inversely proportional to water temperature, with higher levels of dissolved oxygen corresponding to lower temperatures. According to temperature, there are maximum dissolved oxygen concentrations, with 14.6 mg/L being the absolute maximum. Thus, dissolved oxygen results greater than 14.6 mg/L are not possible. Additionally, samplers can check the likelihood of their findings by cross-checking it with a dissolved oxygen vs temperature table (see http://water.epa.gov/type/rsl/monitoring/vms52.cfm).

Twenty-eight sites produced a dissolved oxygen value less than 5.0 mg/L, the level at which aquatic life becomes critically stressed. The sampling sites with 2015 readings less than 5.0 mg/L are noted in bold font in Table B2.

pH

A pH value less than 6 signifies acidic conditions in which toxic heavy metals are more soluble, and therefore more available for uptake by aquatic life. At pH values greater than 9, toxic ammonia concentrations increase. Thus, a pH between 6 and 9 indicates that the waterbody is within a safe pH range for the survival of aquatic life. **One of the pH readings, for site #744 on Cane Run in Scott County, was greater than 9, and none of the sites had readings below 6.**

Temperature

In addition to having its own toxic effect, water temperature affects the solubility and the toxicity of many other water quality parameters. Generally, the solubility of solids increases with increasing temperature, while gases tend to be more soluble in cold water. An important physical relationship exists between the amount of dissolved oxygen in a body of water and its temperature. The warmer the water, the less dissolved oxygen. Colder water can maintain greater dissolved oxygen concentrations.

None of the sites had a temperature reading that exceeded 31.7° Celsius, which is Kentucky's water quality standard for protection of aquatic life in warm water streams.

Flow/Rainfall

Based on visual observations, the flow rate in the streams was assessed using the following numerical equivalents:

- $0 Drv$
- 1 Ponded
- $2 -$ Low
- 3 Normal
- 4 Bank Full
- 5 Flood

The visual flow assessments during the 2015 KRWW sampling season varied greatly, with generally higher flows observed during the summer pathogen sampling events.

Recent rainfall was also recorded by samplers, as an estimate of precipitation during the 48-hour period prior to the sampling event. Results were recorded as zero, 0.1, 0.5, 1.0, 1.5 or > 1.5 inches.

Spring Sampling Event: Flows were mainly normal (3) to low (2) for the spring herbicide event, with reports of 0 to 0.1 inches of recent rainfall.

Synoptic Pathogen Sampling Event: The first pathogen sampling event in July was conducted during bank full to flood conditions. Rainfall recordings showed between 0.5 and greater than 1.5 inches during the prior 48-hour period.

Follow-Up Pathogen Sampling Event: Flows were reported as mainly normal during the August pathogen event, with some reports of bankfull flows throughout the basin. Recent rainfall was reported at nearly all sampling sites, with higher amounts of > 1.5 inches in the central to southern portion of the basin. Recent rainfall conditions could result in E. coli findings from runoff sources, such as septic systems and livestock pastures.

Fall Sampling Event: Low to normal flows were reported during the September sampling event, which is typical in the fall. Recent rainfall recordings varied greatly for the fall event, with reports from zero to >1.5 inches at several locations. Thus, the influence of runoff contributions must be assessed on a site-by-site basis for the fall nutrient and metal sampling results.

Conductivity

Conductivity is a measurement of the ability of an aqueous solution to carry an electrical current. Conductivity measurements are used to determine levels of total inorganic dissolved solid ions, such as nutrients, metals, or other compounds. Indirect effects of high conductivity levels are primarily the elimination of plants needed for food or habitat and the decline of sensitive aquatic species, such as mayflies and fish.

The USEPA recently established a criterion of 500 mS/cm for streams in Central Appalachia. In central Appalachia, the conductivity of headwater streams is naturally between 100 and 200 mS/cm. This is important because the plants, insects and animals in local streams have adapted to living in this level of conductivity. Recent studies conducted by the EPA show that when the conductivity in central Appalachian streams rises to about 300 mS/cm, the plants, insects and animals begin to be affected. When the conductivity of these streams goes above 500 mS/cm, the plants, insects and animals are drastically affected. And when the conductivity measures above 1,000 mS/cm, everything in the stream is effectively dead. [NOTE: KDOW sampling has shown that some pollutant-tolerant aquatic life is present at conductivity levels greater than 1,000 mS/cm.] In other regions of the country the natural conductivity may be higher or lower than in central Appalachia, and the plants, insects and animals there will have adapted over thousands of years to live within those natural conductivity levels.

Field conductivity readings at 86 of 162 separate sampling sites were reported as being greater than 500 microSiemens/cm (mS/cm).

Turbidity

Turbidity is a measure of water clarity and how much the material suspended in the water decreases the passage of light through the water. Suspended materials include soil particles (clay, silt and sand), algae, plankton, microbes, and other substances. Higher turbidity increases water temperatures, because suspended particles absorb more heat. This, in turn, reduces the concentration of dissolved oxygen because warm water holds less dissolved oxygen than cold water. Higher turbidity also reduces the amount of light penetrating the water, which reduces photosynthesis and the production of oxygen. Suspended materials can clog fish gills, reducing resistance to disease in fish, lowering growth rates, and affecting egg and larval development. As the particles settle, they can blanket the stream bottom, especially in slower waters, and smother fish eggs and benthic macroinvertebrates. Sources of turbidity include soil erosion, waste discharge, urban runoff, eroding streambanks, large numbers of bottom feeders which stir up bottom sediments and excessive algal growth (USEPA, www.epa.gov/owow/monitoring/volunteer/stream/vms55.html). The state of Kentucky has not issued water quality standards for turbidity.

Turbidity results were based on subjective observations at the time of sampling. Volunteers rated the turbidity of the waterbody on a scale of 0 (clear) to 3 (turbid).

Herbicide Indicators

During the spring sampling event of May 2015, 10 sampling sites were tested for Triazine to evaluate the possibility of potential pollution from rural and/or urban herbicide applications. Triazine (or Atrazine) is a selective herbicide used to control broadleaf and grassy weeds in corn and other crops, and in conifer reforestation plantings. It is also used as a nonselective herbicide on non-cropped industrial lands and on fallow lands. Atrazine is moderately soluble in water. Atrazine is highly persistent in soil. Chemical hydrolysis followed by microbial breakdown accounts for most of its degradation in soil. Although hydrolysis is rapid in acidic or basic soil environments, it is slower at neutral pHs.

The EPA's maximum contaminant level for Atrazine in drinking water is 3 micrograms/L (http://www.epa.gov/safewater/mcl.html). EPA's Office of Water has published a draft ambient water quality criteria document for atrazine containing acute and chronic criteria recommendations for the protection of aquatic life in both freshwater and saltwater. The procedures described in the "Guidelines for Deriving Numerical National Water Quality Criteria for the Protection of Aquatic Organisms and Their Uses" indicate that, except possibly where a locally important species is very sensitive, freshwater aquatic life and their uses should not be affected unacceptably if the one-hour average concentration does not exceed 350 ug/L more than once every three years on the average (acute criterion). If the four-day average concentration of atrazine does not exceed 12 ug/L more than once every three years on the average (chronic criterion).

Herbicide Sampling Results

Herbicide data were collected at 10 new sampling sites during May of 2015. **Two of the ten sites had detectable levels of Triazine, but neither of the triazine detections exceeded recommended water quality standards. The detections were observed at stream sites in Fayette and Jessamine Counties,** and the locations are shown in Figure 12. A summary of the results for the herbicide data collection effort is provided in Table B3.

Bacteriological Indicator

A number of pathogenic (disease causing) viruses, bacteria, and protozoans can enter a water body via fecal contamination. Human illness can result from drinking water or swimming in water that contains pathogens. Eating shellfish harvested from such waters may also result in human illness.

Unfortunately, direct testing for pathogens is impractical. Pathogens are rarely present in large numbers, and many are difficult to cultivate in the lab. Instead, microbiologists look for "indicator" species – so called because their presence indicates that fecal contamination may have occurred. The indicators most commonly used today include: total coliforms, fecal coliforms, and Escherichia coli. Each of these bacteria are normally prevalent in the intestines and feces of warm-blooded animals, including humans. The indicator bacteria themselves are not usually pathogenic. All but E. coli are composed of a number of species of bacteria that share common characteristics such as shape, habitat, or behavior. E. coli is a single species in the fecal coliform group. It should be pointed out that when a water sample is determined to contain E. coli, that does not necessarily mean that the dangerous strain (i.e. E. coil O157:H7) is actually present. It is probably not; however, it does indicate recent fecal contamination.

Escherichia coli (E. coli)

The bacteria, E. coli, is commonly found in the intestines of healthy humans and animals and produces the K and B– complex vitamins that are then absorbed for nutritional benefit. The presence of E. coli in water indicates fecal contamination and the potential for waterborne disease. EPA recommends E. coli as the best indicator of health risk from water contact in recreational waters. Kentucky has transitioned from a fecal coliform standard to an E. coli standard.

The state criteria for E. coli are based on the designated use of the particular stream and may be summarized as follows: *Primary Contact Recreation* (swimming from May 1 thru Oct 31): E. coli shall not exceed 130 colonies per 100 ml as a monthly geometric mean based on not less than 5 samples per month; nor exceed 240 colonies per 100 ml in 20 percent or more of all samples taken during the month [Note: As a result of the sampling frequency requirement with the first criteria, the state of Kentucky uses the 240 colonies per 100-ml criteria for classifying streams .

Bacteriological Sampling Results

E. coli sampling was conducted twice in the Kentucky River basin during the summer of 2015. The first round of sampling, or the synoptic event, was available for all samplers at all sampling sites. The second round, or follow-up event, was only available at those sites that produced E. coli results greater than 240 cfu/100 ml during the synoptic sampling event (with the exception of a few sites, for which volunteers had been unable to sample in July). The results of each sampling effort are discussed in the following sections.

Synoptic Pathogen Sampling

As in past years, a synoptic round of E. coli samples was collected during the month of July. **Eighty-four percent of the 102 synoptic samples taken exceeded the state's safe swimming/wading standard.** These sample locations and results are shown on the map in Figure 13.

Follow-Up Pathogen Sampling

During the August sampling event, **results indicated pathogen-related problems at 78% (86 of 109) of the sites.** The follow-up sampling sites are mapped in Figure 14. E. coli sampling results from both pathogen sampling events are listed in Table B4, along with the associated rainfall and flow estimates.

Chemical Indicators

General chemical data (alkalinity, chlorides, conductivity, total suspended solids, and sulfate) were collected at 103 sampling locations during the month of September. The individual results for samples analyzed at the KGS lab are show in Table B5, and the results from the Fouser Lab are shown in Table B6.

Alkalinity

Alkalinity refers to the capability of water to neutralize acids (i.e. molecules that when placed in water disassociate and release hydrogen ions (H⁺) which cause the pH of the water to drop. Alkalinity is made up of several anions in the water (i.e. HCO₃, CO₃, and OH). However, for convenience, alkalinity is typically expressed in terms of an equivalent concentration of CaCO₃, however alkalinity is not the concentration of CaCO₃ in the water The alkalinity of natural waters is due primarily to weak acids, although strong bases may also contribute. Bicarbonates represent the major form of alkalinity. Under certain conditions, natural waters may contain appreciable amounts of carbonate and hydroxide alkalinity. This condition is particularly true in surface waters where algae are flourishing. During the day, the algae remove carbon dioxide from the water to the extent that pH values of 9 to 10 are often obtained. Alkalinity is important for fish and aquatic life because it protects or buffers against rapid pH changes. Higher alkalinity levels in surface waters will buffer acid rain and other acid wastes and prevent pH changes that are harmful to aquatic life. Kentucky's water quality criteria state that for protection of aquatic life, the buffering capacity should be at least 20 mg/L. If alkalinity is naturally low, (less than 20 mg/L) there can be no greater than a 25% reduction in alkalinity. **During the 2015 KRWW sampling season, alkalinity values ranged from 25 mg/L at Site #3222 on an Unnamed Tributary in Wolfe County to 271 mg/L at Site #990 on an Unnamed Tributary in Madison County.** Thus, all results indicated a safe alkalinity level for aquatic life.

Chlorides

Chlorides are salts resulting from the combination of the gas chlorine with a metal. However, the chloride that is measured in the water sample is actually not the salt, but the dissolved (or dissociated) chloride anion (Cl⁻). Fish and aquatic communities cannot survive in waters with high levels of chlorides. The state of Kentucky requires that chloride levels be less than 250 mg/L in domestic water supplies. Criteria for protection of aquatic life require levels of less than 600 mg/L for chronic (long-term) exposure and 1200 mg/L for short-term exposure. **During the 2015 KRWW sampling season, the highest chloride value of 197 mg/L was observed at Vaughn's Branch in Fayette County.** (It is notable that a Vaughn's Branch sampling site also produced the highest chloride levels during the 2010, 2011 and 2014 sampling seasons.) No results exceeded the drinking water or aquatic life criteria.

Conductivity

Conductivity is a measurement of the ability of an aqueous solution to carry an electrical current. Conductivity measurements are used to determine mineralization, or total dissolved solids. Indirect effects of excess dissolved solids are primarily the elimination of desirable food plants and habitat-forming plant species. For Kentucky, water quality criteria have been established only for the mainstem of the Ohio River. The limit is 800 microsiemens/cm or 500 mg/L total dissolved solids. The USEPA also recently established conductivity criteria for support of aquatic life in Central Appalachian streams of 500 microsiemens/cm.

During the 2015 KRWW sampling season, conductivity values ranged from 96 mS/cm at site #3222 on an Unnamed Tributary in Wolfe County to 1,261 mS/cm at site #1139 at Vaughn's Branch in Fayette County. Fifty-one percent of the lab readings of conductivity were greater than the KRWW unofficial aquatic life standard of 500 mS/cm.

Total Suspended Solids**:**

One of the biggest sources of water pollution in Kentucky is suspended solids. Suspended solids include inorganic particles (silts, clays, etc.) and organic particles (algae, zooplankton, bacteria, and detritus) that are carried along by water as it runs off the land. The inorganic portion is usually considerably higher than the organic. Both contribute to turbidity, or cloudiness of the water. High values of TSS cause multiple environmental impacts, including clogging fish gills, reducing light penetration, and siltation of stream bottoms and associated habitats. Indirectly, the suspended solids affect other parameters such as temperature and dissolved oxygen. Suspended solids also interfere with effective drinking water treatment. High sediment loads interfere with the treatment processes of coagulation, filtration, and disinfection, and more chlorine is required to effectively disinfect turbid water.

There are no quantitative criteria for TSS. The Kentucky Water Quality Standards for aquatic life state that suspended solids "shall not be changed to the extent that the indigenous aquatic community is adversely affected" and "the addition of settleable solids that may adversely alter the stream bottom is prohibited." The National Academy of Sciences has recommended that the concentration of TSS should not reduce light penetration by more than 10%. In a study in which TSS were increased to 80 mg/L, the macroinvertebrate population was decreased by 60%. **During the 2015 sampling season, the highest total suspended solids concentration of 65 mg/L was observed at Site #793 at McConnell Spring in Fayette County.**

Sulfate:

The most common form of sulfur in well-oxygenated waters is sulfate. Sulfates (SO4⁻²) can be naturally occurring or the result of municipal or industrial discharges. When naturally occurring, they are often the result of the breakdown of leaves that fall into a stream, of water passing through rock or soil containing gypsum and other common minerals, or of atmospheric deposition. Point sources include sewage treatment plants and industrial discharges such as tanneries, pulp mills, and textile mills. Runoff from coal mining operations and fertilized agricultural lands also contributes sulfates to water bodies.

High levels of sulfate in drinking water (> 250 mg/L) can produce an objectionable, astringent taste and can have laxative effects. Generally, older children and adults become accustomed to sulfate in drinking water, but infants are more sensitive to its effects and water high in sulfate (> 400 mg/L) should not be used for baby formula. Sulfate can be removed from drinking water through processes involving ion exchange, reverse osmosis or distillation, but carbon filtration does not remove it.

When sulfate is less than 0.5 mg/L, algal growth will not occur. The state water quality standard for sulfate in drinking water supplies is 250 mg/L. Typically, KRWW sites that exceed the drinking water supply standard for sulfate are located in the coal mining region of southeastern Kentucky and result from groundwater flowing through bedrock with higher sulfur content.

Only one of the 103 sulfate concentrations exceeded the state drinking water supply standard of 250 mg/L. The greatest sulfate reading of 303 mg/L occurred at site #801 on the North Fork Kentucky River in Letcher County. Sulfate results are displayed in Tables B5 and B6.

Nutrient Indicators

Oxygen demanding materials and plant nutrients are among the most common substances discharged to the environment by man's activities, through wastewater facilities and by agricultural, residential, and storm water runoff. The most important plant nutrients, in terms of water quality, are phosphorus and nitrogen. In general, increasing nutrient concentrations increases the potential for accelerated growth of aquatic plants, including algae. Nuisance plant growth can create imbalances in the aquatic community, as well as cause aesthetic and access issues. High densities of phytoplankton (algae) can cause wide fluctuations in pH and dissolved oxygen.

 Total phosphorus (TP) is commonly measured to determine phosphorus concentrations in surface waters. TP includes all of the various forms of phosphorus (organic, inorganic, dissolved, and particulate) present in a sample. Phosphorus is one of the key elements necessary for growth of plants and animals. Phosphates are made up of phosphorus and exist in three forms: orthophosphate, metaphosphate (or polyphosphate) and organically bound phosphate. Each compound contains phosphorous in a different chemical formula. *Ortho* forms are produced by natural processes and are found in sewage. *Poly* forms are used for treating boiler waters and in detergents. In water, they change into the *ortho* form. Organic phosphates are important in nature. Their occurrence may result from the breakdown of organic pesticides that contain phosphates. They may exist in solution, as particles, loose fragments, or in the bodies of aquatic organisms.

In addition to man-made sources, some phosphorus loadings may occur naturally from the watershed soils and underlying geology. Due to background total phosphorus levels in the Kentucky River Basin of as high as 0.25 mg/L, those sites with average total phosphorus concentrations of 0.3 mg/L can be noted as potentially problematic. The informal total phosphorus standard of 0.3 mg/L has been adopted by the KRWW Scientific Advisory Committee as an appropriate level of concern for water quality sampling conducted in the Kentucky River Basin. This value has also been recommended for use as an unofficial benchmark by the Kentucky Division of Water.

Nitrogen is routinely analyzed at most Kentucky ambient sampling sites in the forms of ammonia and ammonium (NH_3/NH_4) , total Kjeldahl nitrogen (TKN), and nitrite and nitrate (NO₂/NO₃). Ammonia and ammonium are readily used by plants. TKN is a measure of organic nitrogen and ammonia in a sample. Nitrate is the product of aerobic transformation of ammonia, and is the most common form used by aquatic plants. Nitrite is usually not present in significant amounts.

Nutrient transport, particularly during the months of April through June, has been identified as one of the primary factors controlling the size of the hypoxic zone that forms during the summer in the northern Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf hypoxic zone is an area where oxygen levels drop too low to support most life in bottom and near-bottom waters. A Mississippi River/Gulf of Mexico Watershed Nutrient Task Force was created in 1997 to address the Massachusetts-size dead zone that is threatening the Gulf's fisheries. In 2008, the Task Force identified Kentucky and Indiana as two of the top six among 31 states contributing excess nitrogen and phosphorus to the Gulf from sources such as sewage treatment plants, farms and power plant emissions. It recommended that Kentucky, and other states contributing the most to the problem, enact new nutrient reduction strategies by 2013. A reassessment report was released in 2013, detailing progress made and outlining continuing plans to reduce nutrient impacts to the Gulf hypoxic zone (http://water.epa.gov/type/watersheds/named/msbasin/upload/hypoxia_reassessment_508.pdf).

Kentucky currently has no official numerical standards or criteria for phosphorus or nitrogen in state waterways, but is working toward developing these standards. The state drinking water supply standard for nitrate-nitrogen, which is a measurement of the nitrogen portion of the nitrate (NO₃) molecule, is 10 mg/L. In order to monitor nutrient effects on aquatic life, KRWW is using a proposed standard of 3 mg/L for total nitrogen, because this level has been demonstrated to produce nutrient-rich conditions supporting algal blooms, along with other aquatic habitat threats.

Nutrient Sampling Results

In addition to chemical data, general nutrient data were also collected at sampling sites during September. A summary of the nutrient data collected during this period is provided in Tables B7 and B8. **Twenty-six of 99 (26%) of the sampling results exceeded the aquatic life benchmark total nitrogen level of 3 mg/L.** As shown in Table B7, the highest total nitrogen reading reported from the KGS lab of 6.11 mg/L was recorded at #1221 on Cane Run in Scott County. **Ten of the nitrate results reported by the KGS lab were above the 10 mg/L drinking water standard for the state of Kentucky.** Several high total nitrogen *estimates* were determined by the Fouser Lab, including the highest recorded level of 15 mg/L at Site #1014 on Elkhorn Creek in Fayette County. Figure 15 displays a map of sites below and above the 3 mg/L threshold.

As shown in Figure 16, **42 of 99 stations (or 42%) had total phosphorus readings in excess of 0.3 mg/l.** The highest recorded phosphorus reading by the KGS lab was 1.34 mg/l, at station #793 at McConnell Spring in Fayette County, and the highest value reported by the Fouser lab was 1.75 mg/L at site #3410 on South Elkhorn Creek in Franklin County.

Metal Indicators

In addition to chemical and nutrient data, metals data were collected at 27 sampling sites in September 2015. Out of the 30 different metals tested during the 2015 KRWW sampling season, 14 metals are associated with specific water quality limits (aluminum, antimony, arsenic, barium, beryllium, cadmium, chromium, copper, iron, lead, nickel, silver, thalium, zinc). Drinking water supply standards are available for thirteen metals (antimony, arsenic, barium, beryllium, cadmium, chromium, copper, iron, lead, nickel, selenium, thallium and zinc). Warm water aquatic life standards are available for eleven metals (aluminum, arsenic, cadmium, chromium, copper, iron, lead, nickel, selenium, silver and zinc). Descriptions of each of the metals sampling parameters are provided in **Appendix C.**

The sampling results for metals are provided in Table B9 and Figure 17. There were no detections of 10 of the 30 **metal parameters; Antimony, Arsenic, Beryllium, Cadmium, Chromium, Gold, Selenium, Silver, Thallium and Tin. Detections of four different metal parameters showed exceedances of related water quality standards.** The following table summarizes these findings.

Biological and Habitat Assessments

KRWW volunteers are also given the opportunity to continue their water quality training and gain a better understanding of their chosen waterway by completing a Phase II Certification in biological and habitat assessment. This training workshop teaches samplers scientific procedures to understand how aquatic macroinvertebrates signify background water quality conditions. Some macroinvertebrates are "high tolerance," and can withstand significant levels of contaminants; whereas other macroinvertebrates are "low tolerance" and cannot survive significant pollutant contamination. Because these organisms must withstand ongoing water quality conditions, their presence is indicative of longer term water quality than a single grab sample event. Whereas a grab sample might miss pollution occurrences, an assessment of the variety and abundance of the biological community in the stream can better capture the overall quality of a stream over time.

A habitat assessment is another way to measure the health of a stream. Its purpose is to look at individual features that provide habitat in a particular length of a stream and determine how well they are functioning. Measurements of these functions are then combined into an overall rating of how livable the stream is for aquatic organisms.

Performing the biological and habitat assessments annually allows volunteers to identify changes that may affect stream health. The most comprehensive information about a stream is gained when samplers are able to combine results from chemical, biological and habitat assessments.

In June of 2015, KRWW volunteers who had received advanced (Phase II) training to conduct biological and habitat assessments of their streams assessed 5 separate stream segments. These assessments provide further insights into the quality of the water and current and potential threats to water quality. A summary of these assessments is included in the following table.

2015 KRWW Habitat and Biological Assessments					
Site ID	Stream	County		Habitat Rating Biological Rating	
763	South Elkhorn	Fayette	good	fair	
1301	North Elkhorn	Scott	good	fair	
3198	Clear Creek	Woodford		fair	
3227	Whittleton Branch	Powell	fair	good	
3252	South Elkhorn	Jessamine	fair	fair	

CHAPTER 3: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the summer of 2015, multiple agencies and organizations provided funds for the support of volunteer water quality sampling in the Kentucky River Basin as part of the Kentucky River Watershed Watch effort. This report summarizes the results of that sampling effort. As part of this sampling effort, 163 separate sites were sampled at up to four different times for three main groups of parameters: herbicides, pathogens, and chemicals/nutrients/metals. In most cases, the stream was also sampled for basic physical and chemical parameters such as pH, temperature, dissolved oxygen and conductivity. None of the reported pH readings for 2015 were less than 6, and only one reading was greater than 9. Thirteen percent (39 of 294) of the dissolved oxygen readings were below the minimum threshold of 5 mg/l that is recommended for supporting aquatic life.

Ten new sites were sampled for the Triazine herbicide. Triazine was detected at two of the sampling sites. Neither of the samples resulted in concentrations that were greater than the water quality standards for drinking water supplies or aquatic life protection.

In 2015, E. coli was analyzed for 102 sites in July. During this synoptic sampling event, 84% of sites analyzed for E. coli exceeded the primary contact recreation standard of 240 cfu/100 ml. The follow-up pathogen sampling event in August showed that 78% of the sites exceeded the standard for E. coli. It may be helpful to consider accompanying rainfall and flow data during each of these sampling events, as heavy precipitation events occurred during the summer of 2015, especially leading up to the July event.

The chemical analysis of samples in September showed that 51% had high laboratory-measured conductivity values (e.g. > 500mS/cm). This result is comparable to the 46% of sites that produced high conductivity readings through the use of field meters.

Twenty-six of 99 sampled sites (26%) exceeded a proposed aquatic life standard for total nitrogen of 3 mg/L, and 10 of the sites exceeded the drinking water supply standard for nitrate-nitrogen of 10 mg/L. Forty-two of 99 sites (42%) displayed total phosphorus levels of concern (above 0.3 mg/L) for support of aquatic life.

Metals were analyzed for water samples from 27 sampling sites in September 2015. Some metal readings exceeded associated water quality standards, including those for aluminum, copper, iron, and lead. Site #820 on the North Fork Kentucky River in Perry County showed exceedances for three different metals.

KRWW volunteers also conducted biological and habitat assessments at five different sites in the Kentucky River Basin during June of 2015. Most habitat ratings were fair to good, and most biological ratings were fair.

Flows were generally higher during the 2015 sampling season, with some peaks in streamflow just prior to the pathogen sampling events in July and August. These conditions may enable a comparison of E. coli levels during prior drier years, such as 2014, to consider the likelihood of nonpoint runoff pathogen sources (evident in the wetter years) versus the likelihood of point sources, such as sewer line leakage (evident in the drier years).

In summary, the following sampling sites have been targeted for more in-depth sampling and water quality management efforts due to 2015 sampling results of concern. These sites are indicated on the map in Figure 18.

Cane Run Watershed (Scott County)

Sites #1174, 1221—Results from these sites indicate concern regarding high pathogen and nutrient levels (nitrogen and phosphorus).

Carr Fork (Perry County)

Site #875– Results indicate concern about conductivity, pathogens and metals.

North Fork Kentucky River (Perry County)

Site #820– Results from this site indicate concern regarding pathogens and metals.

South Elkhorn Creek Watershed (Fayette County)

Wolf Run

Sites 793, 915, 1129, 1132, 1137, 1138, 1139—Results from these sites indicate concern about low dis solved oxygen levels, high conductivity readings, and high pathogen and nutrient concentrations.

Figure 5 2015 Kentucky River Watershed Watch Sampling Sites

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 12 2015 KRWW Herbicide Sampling Results

Figure 13 2015 KRWW Synoptic Pathogen Sampling Results

Figure 14 2015 KRWW Follow-Up Pathogen Sampling Results

Figure 15 2015 KRWW Nitrogen Sampling Results

Figure 16 2015 KRWW Phosphorus Sampling Results

Figure 17 2015 KRWW Metals Sampling Results

Figure 18 2015 KRWW Sampling Sites of Concern

APPENIDIX B: TABLES Table B1

Table B2 2015 KRWW Field Sampling Results

NOTE: Values that exceed water quality standards or benchmarks are noted in bold text.

Spring 2015 KRWW Pesticide Sampling Results

MDL = Method Detection Limit, Results of Less than MDL are less than 0.06 micrograms/L, which is the laboratory's minimum detection limit for Triazines.

Water Quality Standards for Triazines

Drinking Water Supply Source = 3.0 micrograms/L Acute (Short-Term Exposure) Aquatic Life = 350 micrograms/L Chronic (Long-Term Exposure) Aquatic Life = 12 micrograms/L

2015 KRWW Pathogen Sampling Results (July & August)

Safe Swimming Standard:

240 cfu/100 ml

Standard exceedances are noted in bold text.

2015 KRWW Chemical Sampling Results - KGS

detrimental effects on aquatic life.

NOTES:

1) Highest values for each parameter are shaded.

2015 KRWW Chemical Sampling Results - Fouser

NOTES:

* Kentucky Division of Water Water Quality Standard

* *Non-regulatory Kentucky River Watershed Watch Benchmark

1) Highest values for each parameter are shaded.

* Value is an estimate, based on NO3-NO2 + TKN.

**Non-regulatory Kentucky River Watershed Watch Benchmark

1) Highest values for each parameter are shaded.

Table 9

2015 KRWW Metal Sampling Results

NOTES:

1) Highest values for each parameter are shaded.

2015 KRWW Metal Sampling Results

2015 KRWW Metal Sampling Results

2015 KRWW Metal Sampling Results

APPENDIX C: METAL SAMPLING PARAMETERS

Antimony is a USEPA priority pollutant that can be toxic to plants and animals. In addition to the natural occurrence of antimony in bedrock and streambed sediments in the Knobs Region of the Kentucky River Basin, antimony salts are used in the fireworks, rubber, textile, ceramic, glass, and paint industries.

The proposed maximum contaminant level (MCL) in finished drinking water for antimony ranges from 5 to 10 micrograms per liter.

Arsenic occurs naturally in rocks and soil, water, air and plants and animals. It can be further released into the environment through natural activities, such as volcanic action, erosion of rocks, and forest fires, or through human actions. Approximately 90 percent of industrial arsenic in the U.S. is currently used as a wood preservative, but arsenic is also used in paints, dyes, metals, drugs, soaps and semi-conductors. High arsenic levels can also come from certain fertilizers and animal feeding operations. Industry practices, such as copper smelting, mining and coal burning also contribute to arsenic in our environment. Arsenic levels tend to be higher in ground water than in surface water (lakes and rivers). Levels also tend to be higher in the western United States.

Barium is a yellowish-white alkaline earth metal. It combines with water to produce barium hydroxide and is found in nature as barites (BaSO4), witherite (BaCO3), and other ores. Barium and its salts are often used in metallurgical industries for special alloys, in paints, and concrete. Because of the insolubility of most of its compounds, it is not considered to be an ecological threat.

Beryllium is an uncommon alkaline-earth element that is recognized as a USEPA priority pollutant and potential carcinogen. The USEPA has proposed a MCL of 1.0 micrograms per liter for beryllium, and Kentucky has adopted the USEPA lowest-observed effect levels (LOEL) for protection of aquatic life, which are 130 micrograms/liter (1.3 mg/L) and 5.3 micrograms/liter (0.053 mg/L) for acute and chronic toxicity, respectively. In addition, Kentucky water-quality criteria establish a beryllium criterion of 0.117 micrograms per liter for the protection of human health from the consumption of fish tissue. The criterion is based upon an acceptable risk level of no more than one additional cancer case in a population of 1 million people.

Cadmium s a non-essential element and it diminishes plant growth. It is considered a potential carcinogen. It also has been shown to cause toxic effects to the kidneys, bone defects, high blood pressure, and reproductive effects. Cadmium is widely distributed in the environment at low concentrations. It can be found in fairly high concentrations in sewage sludge. Primary industrial uses for cadmium are plating, battery manufacture, pigments, and plastics.

Chromium is ubiquitous in the environment, occurring naturally in the air, water, rocks and soil. It is used in stainless steel, electroplating of chrome, dyes, leather tanning and wood preservatives. It occurs in several forms, or oxidation states. The two most common are chromium VI and chromium III. The form depends on pH. Natural sources of water contain very low concentrations of chromium. It is a micronutrient (or essential trace element). High doses of chromium VI have been associated with birth defects and cancer; however, chromium III is not associated with these effects. Plants and animals do not bioaccumulate chromium; therefore, the potential impact of high chromium levels in the environment is acute toxicity to plants and animals. In animals and humans this toxicity may be expressed as skin lesions or rashes and kidney and liver damage.

Copper is a USEPA priority pollutant that is a micronutrient for the growth of plants and animals, but even small concentrations of copper in surface water can be toxic to aquatic life. Copper sulfate is frequently used to control nuisance growths of algae in water supply reservoirs. The toxicity of copper is a function of the total hardness of the water, because copper ions are complexed by anions that contribute to water hardness. Although detectable concentrations of copper in water are not known to have an adverse effect on humans, the MCL for copper has been established at 1,000 micrograms/liter, which corresponds with the taste threshold concentration for this element (National Academy of Sciences National Academy of Engineering, 1972). [USGS]

Iron is the fourth most abundant element, by weight, in the earth's crust. Natural waters contain variable amounts of iron depending on the geological area and other chemical components of the waterway. Iron in groundwater is normally present in the ferrous or bivalent form (Fe2+), which is soluble. It is easily oxidized to ferric iron (Fe3+) or insoluble iron upon exposure to air. This precipitate is orange-colored and often turns streams orange. Iron is a trace element required by both plants and animals. It is a vital part of the oxygen transport mechanism in the blood (hemoglobin) of all vertebrate and some invertebrate animals. Ferrous Fe2+ and ferric Fe3+ irons are the primary forms of concern in the aquatic environment. Other forms may be in either organic or inorganic wastewater streams. The ferrous form can persist in water void of dissolved oxygen and usually originates from groundwater or mines that are pumped or drained. Iron in domestic water supply systems stains laundry and porcelain. It appears to be more of a nuisance than a potential health hazard. Taste thresholds of iron in water are 0.1 mg/L for ferrous iron and 0.2 mg/L for ferric iron, giving a bitter taste or an astringent taste. Water to be used in industrial processes should contain less than 0.2 mg/L iron. Black or brown swamp waters may contain iron concentrations of several mg/L in the presence or absence of dissolved oxygen, but this iron form has little effect on aquatic life.

Lead is primarily found in nature as the mineral galena (lead sulfide). It also occurs as carbonate, as sulfate and in several other forms. The solubility of these minerals and also of lead oxides and other inorganic salts is low. Major modern day uses of lead are for batteries, pigments, and other metal products. In the past, lead was used as an additive in gasoline and became dispersed throughout the environment in the air, soils, and waters as a result of automobile exhaust emissions. For years, this was the primary source of lead in the environment. However, since the replacement of leaded gasoline with unleaded gasoline in the mid-1980's, lead from that source has virtually disappeared. Mining, smelting, and other industrial emissions and combustion sources and solid waste incinerators are now the primary sources of lead. Another source of lead is paint chips and dust from buildings built before 1978 and from bridges and other metal structures.

Nickel is a USEPA priority pollutant that can adversely affect humans and aquatic organisms. Nickel is an important industrial metal that is used extensively in stainless steel. Substantial amounts of nickel can be contributed to the environment by waste disposal (Hem, 1989) and atmospheric emissions. Nickel ions are toxic, particularly to plant life, and can exhibit synergism when present with other metallic ions (National Academy of Sciences National Academy of Engineering, 1972). [USGS]

Selenium is a nonmetallic trace element that is listed as a primary pollutant by the USEPA. Selenium is an essential micronutrient for plants and animals, but can be toxic in excessive amounts. Selenium is a relatively rare element, and concentrations of selenium in natural waters seldom exceed 1.0 microgram/liter (Hem, 1989). Sources of selenium in the Kentucky River Basin include sedimentary rocks and fly ash from coal-fired power plants that operate in Kentucky.

Silver is a USEPA priority pollutant that is extensively used for photography and various industrial and commercial purposes. Although average concentrations of silver in natural waters are small (0.3 micrograms/liter), elevated silver concentrations can be acutely or chronically toxic to aquatic organisms, and sublethal amounts can bioaccumulate in fish and invertebrate organisms (Hem, 1989). [USGS]

Thallium is a USEPA priority pollutant that can be toxic to humans and aquatic life. Thallium salts are used as poison for rats and other rodents, as well as in dyes, pigments in fireworks, and optical glass (National Academy of Sciences National Academy of Engineering, 1972).

Zinc is found naturally in many rock-forming minerals. Because of its use in the vulcanization of rubber, it is generally found at higher levels near highways. It also may be present in industrial discharges. It is used to galvanize steel, and is found in batteries, plastics, wood preservatives, antiseptics, and in rat and mouse poison (zinc phosphide). Zinc is an essential element in the diet. It is not considered very toxic to humans or other organisms.