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This document contains the National Water Quality Inventory: Report to Congress, 2002 Reporting Cycle: Future Reporting.

The report can be downloaded from:

http://www.epa.gov/305b/

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October 2007

Future Reporting

Photo courtesy of Lauren Holbrook, IAN Image Library

For many years, water quality monitoring, assessment, and reporting in the United States has suffered from inconsistencies in state programs and methods, as well as the lack of scientifically defensible, national-level information that could be used to track water quality changes over time. The probability-based studies mentioned above are designed to address the need for national-level information.

Improving state water monitoring and assessment programs is an ongoing effort. EPA issued guidance in March 2003 describing basic elements of a state monitoring and assessment program (e.g., monitoring objectives, monitoring designs, core water quality indicators, a quality assurance program, a data management system, data analysis methodologies, reports on findings, periodic program evaluation, identification of future needs, and a long-term strategy to implement these elements). In response to this guidance, states have prepared comprehensive, long-term strategies that address all water types, including those for which little data currently exist. These strategies will help identify needed actions and overall challenges facing states as they work to improve monitoring over the coming decade.

The states and EPA are taking steps toward streamlining and improving water quality monitoring and assessment by integrating monitoring and reporting requirements under Sections 305(b) and

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303(d) of the Clean Water Act. Section 305(b) requires states to report biennially on the condition of their waters. Under Section 303(d), states, territories, and authorized tribes are required to develop lists of impaired waters. Impaired waters are those waters that do not meet water quality standards, even after point sources of pollution have installed the required levels of pollution-control technology. The Clean Water Act requires that these jurisdictions establish priority rankings for waters on the lists and develop TMDLs for these waters.

A TMDL specifies the maximum amount of a pollutant that a waterbody can receive and still meet water quality standards; it also allocates pollutant loadings among point and nonpoint pollutant sources.

EPA has issued guidance to the states to clarify integrated reporting requirements for the 2006 reporting cycle and has established a goal that all 50 states and 6 territories and jurisdictions use the integrated reporting format by 2008. EPA continues to promote this comprehensive assessment approach to improve the states' ability to track both the programmatic and environmental goals of the Clean Water Act, and ideally, to increase the pace of achieving these important environmental goals. (See http://www.epa.gov/owow/tmdl for more information on EPA's national water quality reporting guidance.)

For the 2002 305(b) cycle, states were asked to submit their monitoring findings electronically using EPA's Assessment Database, a tool developed for state reporting. Most provided electronic data in alternate yet compatible formats, and EPA transferred these data into the National Assessment Database for purposes of national reporting. This electronic reporting requires a significant commitment at the state and national levels. EPA and the states are working to ensure that each assessed watershed and waterbody is identified using a consistent national surface water locational system (the National Hydrography Dataset). States enter their assessment results (e.g., whether a waterbody is supporting its designated uses, which uses are not supported, and what is causing impairment) for each sampling location. EPA will continually adapt and improve the National Assessment Database to reflect new reporting requirements and the full range of state monitoring activities (including probability-based surveys), as well as continue to fully support state efforts to adopt electronic reporting. This commitment will yield more comprehensive information that can be easily accessed by water quality managers and the public.

As this report has shown, we are limited by our lack of complete knowledge about many of the nation's waters. Without this knowledge, we cannot accurately determine how effective our pollution-control programs are or if water quality conditions are improving or declining. Monitoring strategies, integrated reporting, and electronic reporting of assessment findings, along with probability-based national and regional studies, are all designed to improve what we know about the nation's water quality conditions. EPA and the states are committed to working toward providing better methods for water quality monitoring and assessment and improved data in the future.

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