



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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MWRD CHEERS national win

Univ. of IL at Chicago study of area waterways use receives award

A University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) study focusing on the health risks associated with recreating on the Chicago Area Waterway System (CAWS) has received the grand prize for university research from the American Academy of Environmental Engineers.

The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) sponsored the three-year epidemiology study. Dr. Samuel Dorevitch, Associate Professor of Environmental & Occupational Health Sciences at UIC School of Public Health, designed the study using the United States Environmental Protection Agency National Epidemiological and Environmental Assessment of Recreational Water (NEEAR) study as a model.

"Few wastewater treatment agencies make research a priority in the way that the MWRD does," said Dr. Dorevitch. "It's been challenging and interesting to work on a health study of this scale that addresses a local environmental policy decision. Now that the work is done, it's rewarding to see the findings published so that others in the community of water quality researchers can learn from the work we've done."

The CHEERS study is the first in the United States to address the health risks to individuals who engaged in incidental contact water recreational activities such as boating, fishing and rowing. The health information of the recreating member was compared with water quality tests for indicators and pathogens during the same time at the CAWS, Lake Michigan and other rivers and inland lake locations.

The CAWS includes the Cal-Sag Channel, the North and South Branches of the Chicago River, the Main Stem of the Chicago River, and the North Shore Channel. The system was designed to connect Lake Michigan to the Illinois River, and just as it was planned, the system is used for transportation, commerce, and to convey stormwater away from Lake Michigan, the source of the Chicago area's drinking water. In the meantime, recreation is also a popular use of the system.

Wastewater treatment plants release treated wastewater into the CAWS, and the CHEERS research study was conducted to better understand the benefits that might be realized if the MWRD resumed disinfection of wastewater effluents at its North Side and Calumet water reclamation plants and to determine appropriate water quality criteria to protect secondary contact recreation.

"The MWRD is well known for developing the science on issues through productive collaboration, and this study adds to a rich body of work," said David St. Pierre, MWRD executive director. "We are thrilled that the MWRD and UIC received this prestigious recognition."

MWRD Monitoring and Research Director Dr. Thomas Granato directed the study parameters. "We assembled a world class team of dedicated researchers with a novel approach to assessing public health impacts of surface water quality," said Dr. Granato. "The team at UIC worked many long days and weekends to complete this study, and their work product is world class."

Dr. Geeta Rijal, MWRD Supervising Environmental Microbiologist, was directly involved in the study. "The CHEERS was a tremendous research effort, and the study was driven by the quest for the great unknown about the current health risks to people recreating on the CAWS," said Dr. Rijal. "CHEERS produced the best public health microbiology science for secondary contact water."

The study surveyed over 11,000 participants at CHEERS recruiting stations strategically located near boat launches and other high profile locations where water recreation takes place along the CAWS; waterbodies included Lake Michigan the Des Plaines, DuPage, and Fox Rivers, inland lakes and lagoons, Busse Lake, Tampier Lake, and the Skokie Lagoons. Water bacteria, viruses, and germs were tested.

Study participants were contacted three times over three weeks to check on their health status. If a participant developed an ailment, they were asked to provide further information for testing.

The study found that secondary contact recreation on the CAWS is not any riskier than on other nearby rivers or lakes. This will be further improved when disinfection is implemented.

The award will be presented on April 26, 2012 at the National Press Club in Washington, DC.

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Our water environment...Take it personally.

Established in 1889, the MWRD (www.mwrdd.org) is an award-winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.