

Lake*A*Syst aims to protect water quality

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SANDPOINT -- Water quality watchdogs are launching an ambitious effort aimed at encouraging waterfront landowners to take an active roll in protecting Lake Pend Oreille from pollution.

The Bonner County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Tri-State Water Quality Council are announcing the pending rollout of the Lakeshore Assessment System, also known as the Lake*A*Syst project.

Lake*A*Syst is an education project designed to help landowners around the lake to identify and remedy pollution sources linked to shoreline development. Landowners should expect to see informational packets sometime in June. The direct mailings will contain fact sheets covering a range of topics, including stormwater runoff, lawn and garden management, new construction considerations, road and driveway runoff, and household wastewater.

The packets will also contain practical information landowners can utilize to curb the amount of pollution that winds up in the lake.

"It's hard to live on the lakeshore without having an impact," said Gary Parker, a water quality resource conservationist with the Bonner Soil and Water Conservation District.

Parker estimates there are more than 2,000 people who live on the lake's shoreline.

Manicured and irrigated lawns which march right to the water's edge are notorious for adding nitrates and phosphorus. Heavy equipment ripping up the shoreline for a new home can put sediment and industrial fluids into the water. Substandard septic tanks bring bacteria and more unwanted nutrients.

But homeowners can limit their impacts on water quality, sometimes with simple and relatively inexpensive measures. A shoreline buffer zone of natural vegetation can keep nutrient loading from lawns in check, and silt fences around construction sites can keep sediments corralled.

Septic system upgrades can be costly, although Lake*A*Syst volunteers are willing to help landowners seek out grant opportunities and cost share programs. Parker also plans to do on-site consultations with landowners who have complex or technical issues.

The Pend Oreille Lake*A*Syst program is patterned after a Lake*A*Syst program recently conducted at Priest Lake. Funding for the Pend Oreille project was coordinated by Lance Holloway of the Idaho Department of Agriculture in association with Tri-State and the conservation district. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, the Idaho Soil Conservation Commission, Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts, Natural Resources Conservation Service and the city of Sandpoint are also associated with the project.

The Lake*A*Syst program is voluntary and Parker acknowledges some of the packets will go straight from the mailbox to the trash bin.

"We're trying to alter people's behavior and that's not easy," he said.

Lake*A*Syst volunteers also plan to enlist the support of lake associations and other landowner groups. Parker hopes one landowners' cooperation result will cause neighbors to join in the effort.

"I'm hoping a little peer pressure will go a long way," Parker said.