



## PRAISE FOR SIMPLICITY, CONCERN ABOUT BREVITY



MIKE BROWNLEE, JOURNAL STAFF

Rapid Creek near Storybook Island in Rapid City.

### State unveils new format for South Dakota water quality report

**JOSHUA HAIAR**  
South Dakota Searchlight

South Dakota's environmental regulatory department has changed how it publicly presents its report on the quality of the state's rivers, lakes and streams, leading to praise for the simplified presentation but concern about the reduced amount of information made available.

Instead of publishing the 2026 Surface Water Quality Assessment as a 200-plus-page document, as it has in the past, the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources is directing the public to a scrollable presentation on the department's website. A separate, online Surface Water Quality Dashboard allows viewers to click waterways on a map for information.

The reports come out every two years. The 2024 report included detailed sections on monitoring, methodology, assessments, pollution control programs, pollution causes and more.

That year, the state reported that 78% of assessed stream miles, as well as 68.5% of lake surface acres in the state, did not support one or more of their assigned "beneficial uses." That refers to a practical purpose that a lake, river or stream is supposed to serve, such as swimming, fishing, boating or irrigation. If a waterbody is not meeting a beneficial use, it means the water is polluted beyond the standard set for that use.

The 2026 data show that 77% of assessed stream miles and 73% of lake acres are not supporting one or more of their beneficial uses.

Mercury in water remains the primary cause of water bodies failing to support their beneficial uses. About 70% of the tested lake acres in the state have mercury levels exceeding their standards,

which is about the same as in 2024. The toxic heavy metal ends up in fish worldwide, largely due to atmospheric deposition. Coal-fired power plants release mercury into the air before it settles into lakes and rivers.

Another major pollutant is E. coli, with 68% of river and stream miles testing at levels that are too high.

But unlike past reports, the new one does not include statements such as one from the 2024 report calling nonpoint-source pollution, such as E. coli, the state's "most serious and pervasive threat" to water quality, or examples of causes such as livestock waste, and failing septic systems. Those kinds of explanatory passages do not appear at the same level of detail in the new format.

Paul Lorenzen, watershed protection administrator with the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, explained to lawmakers during the 2026 legislative session why the format change was occurring. He said the prior format made the percentage of unsupported beneficial uses sound "troubling" and got "quite a bit of attention," without the public fully understanding the meaning.

"We're really trying to limit the narrative and be heavy on pictures, graphs, tables, things like that," Lorenzen told lawmakers.

Lorenzen said waters not supporting all their uses are not necessarily unsafe or unusable. He said that, often, only one parameter or sample fails, criteria can be conservative, and increases in the percentage of non-supporting uses over time can reflect more data or changed standards, rather than worsening quality.

Lorenzen said the new format is intended to make the report easier to understand and less

dependent on a dense executive summary.

Travis Entenman is the executive director of Friends of the Big Sioux River. He said his organization is "excited that the report is in a more user-friendly system, more interactive and we have more access to the data."

However, "We do feel like there is a lack of analysis of the causes, and the next steps beyond saying this is the water quality level," Entenman said. "Now what?"

The streamlined public presentation arrives as concern about agriculture's role in water pollution has grown. A legislative memo last year said E. coli from livestock was the primary reason some streams did not support recreational uses.

In November, when that memo was shared, Senate President Pro Tempore Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, said the state could no longer "dance around" the possibility of stronger agricultural regulation if something was to be done about water pollution. Gov. Larry Rhoden then said he would set Karr straight.

Karr then sponsored and Rhoden signed a bill into law during this year's legislative session that put \$10 million toward water quality improvement programs. It offers \$8 million to incentivize an existing water quality initiative that helps landowners plant buffer strips that filter agricultural runoff, and \$2 million to help improve local water, wastewater and stormwater systems.

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## Businesses urge power merger

Consumers cite cost, reliability concerns as Black Hills, NorthWestern work on deal

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Daily Montanan

If NorthWestern Energy and Black Hills Corp merge, the deal could mean as much as \$16 million for CEO Brian Bird, and a total of nearly \$30 million for the top five executives of the Montana utility.

Bird is CEO of NorthWestern, and if the Montana Public Service Commission approves the proposed merger, and the deal goes through, Bird would head the new company, Bright Horizon Energy, or get the "golden parachute."

Tuesday, the Montana Public Service Commission's hearing on the \$15.4 billion merger started, with ratepayers calling for more transparency when it comes to data centers, and business representatives pushing for approval of the deal in a quest for reliable power.

In opening statements, lawyers for the utilities argued the merger will "deliver long-term value to customers" — but one attorney representing a couple of third parties said it would be a "betrayal" of Montanans.

"Everyone at the table negotiating this deal loved it," said lawyer Monica Tranel, with 350 Montana and the Montana Farmers Union. "They all can make a lot of money from it. But who wasn't there? The people of Montana."

In questioning, Tranel showed NorthWestern would have less control if the merger is approved; Black Hills would account for 56% of the parent company overseeing the merged entity, while NorthWestern would account for 44%, and Black Hills would have six board seats, while NorthWestern would have five.

But lawyer Sarah Norcott, with NorthWestern Energy, said a merged company would still be under the oversight of the Montana Public Service

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## WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST Trump sends another threat

**TALA RAMADAN**  
Reuters

DUBAI — A drone strike caused a fire at a nuclear power plant in the United Arab Emirates, officials there said Sunday, while Saudi Arabia reported intercepting three drones, and President Donald Trump warned that Iran must act "fast" after efforts to end the U.S. -Israeli war with Iran appeared to have stalled.

Emirati officials said they were investigating the source of the strike and that the UAE had the full right to respond to such "terrorist attacks." A diplomatic adviser to the UAE president said it represented a dangerous escalation, whether carried out by "the principal perpetrator" or one of its proxies.

The UAE defense ministry said two other drones were "successfully" dealt with, and that the drones were launched from the "western border." It did not elaborate.

Saudi Arabia said the three drones it intercepted entered from Iraqi airspace and warned that it would take the necessary operational measures to respond to any attempt to violate its sovereignty and security.

While hostilities during the Iran conflict have largely been scaled down since a ceasefire came into effect in April, drones have been launched from Iraq toward Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The drone that got through the UAE's defenses hit an electrical generator outside the inner perimeter of the Barakah Nuclear Power Plant, the Abu Dhabi Media Office said. Radiological safety levels were unaffected and there were no injuries, it said. UAE's Federal Authority for Nuclear Regulation later confirmed that the plant remained safe, with no radioactive material released from the strike.

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