

Fort High class helps protect watershed

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A local group of students has been working hard to raise awareness on the impacts of pollutants going into storm drains throughout the town.

In partnership with the Koochiching Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Jody Bonner-Vickers' Grade 8 class at Fort High took to the streets on May 29 to spread their message.

Alongside approximately 50 storm sewer drains in the west end of town, students spray painted onto a stencil that read "No dumping drains to river" to remind the public that any forms of litter going down the drains pollutes the International Rainy-Lake of the Woods Watershed.

"A lot of people don't know that the water that goes down into our [storm] drains does not get treated, it goes straight into surface water—the lakes and the rivers," noted Jolén Simon, program co-ordinator for the Koochiching SWCD.

"So we thought that was a great message to work with and this is the third year we've done it now."

Fort High students worked on storm drains by the Sorting Gap Marina for the first two years of the program and the



Grade 8 Fort High student Jailyne Taylor, centre, spray-painted a "no dumping" stencil by a storm water drain on Flinders Avenue last Wednesday morning as fellow students Yasmeen Elkheir, left, Leathe Bruyere, Jerzi Calder, and Healey Jansen looked on. —Sam Odrowski photo

Falls High School has also participated each year.

The program was first started by the Koochiching SWCD in 2017 after receiving a grant through the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency through

their Clean Water Fund.

The SWCD were tasked with working on a project internationally, so they partnered with the Lake of the Woods Sustainability Foundation in Kenora and came up with the drain

stencil program.

"We thought, 'What better way to work with kids and schools and the community than to paint messages on drain stencils,'" Simon remarked.

"That way, we can do an ed-

ucational component with the kids and then go out and do a community message."

The objective of the program is to remind the public that when they're washing their car or fertilizing their backyard, the chemicals they use could harm the watershed.

"One of the biggest issues is with fertilizers, because there is phosphorus in them."

Phosphorus helps plants grow and when it's leaked into lakes, it can lead to algae growth.

Algae doesn't only dirty nearby coastlines—it can also be harmful to fish and humans.

As well, the excess plant growth caused by the phosphorus can block the sun from fish and smaller microbes.

"It disturbs the natural cycle of rivers and lakes when your giving it [phosphorus]," Simon noted.

"When you're getting that run-off of fertilizers into water—it's pretty impactful once it gets downstream."

Pesticide and herbicide run-off that makes its way into storm drains can also be very damaging for amphibians.

"They're the most at risk because they breath through their skin, so you really see a lot of impacts with those animals because they are actually physically breathing in the chemicals," Simon explained.

The Grade 8 Fort High class

who participated in the drain stencil program this year learned all about these effects as well as stewardship and how to protect the International Rainy-Lake of the Woods Watershed.

"They were very well-behaved and very enthusiastic about it," Simon noted.

Each year a new group of students learns about the watershed and participates in the program and they extend to new areas to stencil more storm drains.

"Doing this each year gives us the opportunity to expand," Simon said. "This year, we did closer to the [High] school in Fort Frances, and all the other years we've done by the [Sorting Gap] Marina."

"This helps us to move around to do different drains," she added.

Simon said the project will run again next year, as the stencil's get worn down by traffic over time and can use a touch up.

"We're finding that after a couple years they get to be either hard to read or non-existent so we do have to go back to areas if we want it to remain there," Simon explained.

She is very thankful to the school districts for participating and the Town of Fort Frances for supporting the project each year.