Clean rivers are at risk

Treatment sites in need of urgent attention

Amid the optimism driven by our region's expanding trail system and natural attractions is a potential dark cloud that cannot be ignored.

The accomplishments made by many working to remove acid-mine pollution from local waterways represent a wonderful yet tenuous success story.

Many local treatment sites – which use limestone to filter out acidic pollutants – are failing or nearing the end of their lifespans, area experts say.

We must fund projects to fortify or rebuild local treatment sites endangering the Stonycreek River – which carries the life blood of much of the region's recreational tourism industry.

Len Lichvar, vice chairman of the Stonycreek-Conemaugh River Improvement Project and manager of the Somerset Conservation District, expressed his concerns in a Vision 2020 section interview with reporter Mark Pesto.

That section published Feb. 23.

"What really has to be understood is that, although we're treating abandoned mine drainage, we've never eliminated one ounce of it," Lichvar said. "OK? Not one drop.

"There's just as much AMD pouring out of abandoned mines today as there was 25, 30, 50, 75 years ago. … "It's like cancer. You might not be able to cure cancer in certain forms, but you can treat the symptoms, and that's really what we're doing here."

We urge our elected state and federal representatives, Gov. Tom Wolf and county governments to step forward and fund this crucial effort.

Protecting our reborn water resources must be a priority.

In the past 20 years, the Stonycreek River especially – and our region's waterways generally – have seen dramatic improvement from days of dead, orange streams so many Johnstown-area residents remember.

The push by SCRIP, conservation and recreation districts and authorities, organizations such as Trout Unlimited and others can be seen from the tributaries of the Stonycreek all the way to the Allegheny River near Pittsburgh, and across the Susquehanna River watershed to the north and east.

Work to build passive treatment sites and remove industrial pollution from streams and rivers led directly to elevated whitewater rafting and kayaking on the Stonycreek, helped by water releases from the Quemahoning Reservoir, and renewed opportunities for fishing and other activities.

Much of our regional explosion of outdoor tourism activities and the dollars they generate – through fees, lodging and dining, apparel and equipment sales, and on and on – could unravel quickly if these AMD sites are not addressed, with both private and public support.

In 2018, the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy "State of the Kiski-Conemaugh Watershed" report warned of treatment sites in dire need of repair.

Failure to act, the report cautioned, could release high currents of AMD-tainted water back into the environment and set the region's treatment efforts – and water recreation – back decades.

"No doubt we have come a long way, but I think we are at a tipping point," Melissa Reckner, stream team director for the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy, told The Tribune-Democrat two years ago. "If we don't maintain the systems we have installed, we could go backward. And we could easily lose the life we've returned to our streams."

Lichvar echoed those concerns – even as he applauded ongoing efforts, such as the AMD treatment work along the upper portion of the West Branch of the Susquehanna River in northern Cambria County.

That stream has been reclassified as a Class A wild trout water by the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission – thanks to cleaner water and the return of aquatic life.

"It's now becoming a destination point for anglers from all over, not just locally," Lichvar said. "That's what an active treatment system can do. That's an economic generator, right there, where they had nothing but a historically polluted river for all those miles."

We've seen good-news stories such as this across the Cambria-Somerset region and beyond.

Now we must work together to complete the work needed to sustain the environmental gains we've made.