

Clearing the way

By ALEXANDRA NEWMAN - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Friday, July 7, 2017 6:00 am

COLOMA — When the emerald ash borer attacked the ash trees a couple years back, it created a lot of dead trees along the Paw Paw River.

Over the years, those trees, not counting the ones that occasionally fall during storms, fell into and across the water, making large portions impassible for area paddlers.

But last week the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission and the Two Rivers Coalition (TRC), announced that work over the last couple of months to clear segments of the river is complete and ready for public use.

TRC President Kevin Haight said a lot of work went in to hiring contractors and getting trained volunteers out in the water to clear the blockages.

He said not just anyone can get out in a boat with a chainsaw, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources has rules about clearing rivers.

The dead trees along the Paw Paw River offer suitable habitat for certain types of birds and other wildlife, Haight said.

“We’re basically just clearing a path through and leaving as much as possible,” Haight said. “Once the water level goes down in the fall we will be able to get to bigger branches that right now kayakers can paddle over.”

They also aren’t allowed to pull trees out of the ground if they are attached, to keep the structural integrity of the banks and to keep sediment from being displaced.

Haight said that while TRC is an environmental organization and not a paddle group, its mission is to promote appreciation and protection for the freshwater resources in the watersheds of Southwest Michigan.

“We have an amazing natural resource here in the Paw Paw River floodplain. We realize that the best way to teach people to value this beautiful river and its unique wildlife habitat is to get them out paddling and seeing it firsthand,” he said.

The Paw Paw River Water Trail stretches 68 miles from Paw Paw to its confluence with the St. Joseph River in Benton Harbor.

“Having the support of the municipalities along the Paw Paw River was critical in getting this project funded and initiated,” said Marcy Hamilton, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning



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Kevin Haight and Marcy Hamilton, back, navigate their way past fallen trees and branches Thursday while kayaking a section of the Paw Paw River Trail near the Bundy Road access.

Commission. “Their support moving forward will be needed to maintain and promote the trail once it is fully established.”

Haight said he sees this as a driver for more small business to open along the river in Paw Paw, Lawrence, Hartford, Watervliet and Coloma, like kayak rental shops and restaurants.

Soon 19 continuous miles of the trail will be cleared from Hartford to Bundy Road, west of Coloma. By the end of the summer they hope to have more than 30 miles cleared, Hamilton said.

The goal is to clear as long of a paddle pathway as possible, but some segments of the waterway are very difficult to clear because of their remoteness and large number of fallen trees, Hamilton said.

One of the players in helping get the river cleared is Sarett Nature Center in Benton Township, Haight said. A large portion of the river from Bundy Road in Coloma to north of Benton Harbor falls in their property and is very hard to get through.

Right now there are about 3-4 miles of paddle-ready river with public access sites at each of the towns along the river, Hamilton said.

Eventually, the water trail will have its own website with information for paddlers to plan their trips, including maps of primary public access sites and secondary bridge crossing access locations, Hamilton said. For the time being, the most up-to-date source of information is the Paw Paw River Water Trail Facebook page: www.facebook.com/PawPawRiverWaterTrail/.

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