



Local News

Groups try to reduce sediment flowing into St. Joseph River

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ST. JOSEPH - While the Army Corps of Engineers is awarding contracts for spring dredging of the St. Joseph River harbor, several organizations are aiming to reduce sediment loading that makes the expensive work necessary each year.

Runoff from 5,000 square miles of land in Michigan and Indiana drained by the river is responsible for a lot of the sediment that clogs the harbor, making it tough for ships to navigate without annual dredging.

Runoff that carries sediment, nutrients and other pollutants into the river can be reduced by convincing farmers to use best land management practices, preserving and restoring water-retaining wetlands, and other strategies, the St. Joseph River Harbor Authority was told Thursday.

Marcy Colclough, senior planner at the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, and Matt Meersman, president of the nonprofit Friends of the St. Joe River, described the improvement efforts.

Meersman said the biggest culprit in increased sediment is land use changes that have altered the way water gets into the river.

Paving and development, farming by plowing to the edge of streams and extensive work to drain land have elevated the "flashiness" of the river, Meersman said. That means the tendency of the river to rise quickly in response to rainfall or snow melt.

The flash effect also increases erosion within the river channel, adding more sediments.

In the 1830s, before the area was heavily settled, an estimated 21,000 tons of sediment ended up at the river's mouth each year. The quantity more than doubled by the early 1990s.

Preserving remaining wetlands and restoring some that have been lost can slow runoff and result in a lower sediment volume.

"That's one of the things we really want to do," he told the harbor authority.

Federal funding is available for farmers in the St. Joseph River and Kalamazoo River watersheds to adopt no-till and other conservation practices, build sediment control basins and take other steps.

The regional planning group and Friends of the St. Joe River work with soil conservation districts, watershed planners and others.

Colclough said watershed management plans have been written for the St. Joseph, Paw Paw and other rivers. They provide strategies to reduce the volume of sediments and other pollutants that get into the rivers.

Progress can be slow, Colclough said, because it involves working one-on-one with landowners, trying to convince them to do things that might not appear to be beneficial and will cost money.

The federal government is addressing the problem of surface water pollution through the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System. The permit program has been effective in reducing point source pollution, which is generated at one place.

Non-point pollution is runoff that comes from "everywhere," Colclough said, and is more difficult to address.

Low-impact development is one way. It's an approach designed to reduce runoff volumes and increase pollutant filtering by including open spaces, native plant landscaping porous pavement and having less impermeable surfaces.

In other business, John Gruchot, planning coordinator for Berrien County, reported that a Michigan Department of Transportation project to replace an electric cable that runs under the St. Joseph River is scheduled for completion by March 15.

The cable runs along the Blossomland Bridge and provides power to raise and lower it.

The cable project must be completed before the turning basin on the inner harbor can be dredged. The Army Corps has awarded a \$794,800 contract to Ryba Marine of Cheboygan to remove 52,000 cubic yards of material from the basin.

The inner harbor material is to be trucked at the Southwest Michigan Regional Airport disposal site in Benton Harbor.

The federal government has been allocated \$718,000 for annual dredging of the outer harbor but a contract has not yet been awarded, said Lynn Duerod, public information officer for the Army Corps district office in Detroit.

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