

Ox Creek's erosion problem

By LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, January 28, 2016 6:00 am

BENTON HARBOR — One of the most polluted streams in Southwest Michigan received a little more attention Wednesday when conservationists talked with farmers about how to manage their land in a way to reduce erosion.

Marcy Colclough, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission in Benton Harbor, said the pollution from Ox Creek goes through the Paw Paw River and eventually, the St. Joseph River, which empties into Lake Michigan.

She spoke during the “Productive Lands, Cleaner Water” workshop Wednesday sponsored by the Berrien Conservation District.

She said the St. Joseph River watershed is the third-largest watershed flowing into the lake. Combine that with the fact that the Great Lakes contain 21 percent of the fresh water in the world and suddenly, cleaning up that little creek becomes very important.

“They did some studies on Ox Creek and ... the macroinvertebrates and the fish and the aquatic life are not doing very well,” she said. “The reason for this is we have a lot of siltation sediment getting into the creek and covering up the habitat. They’re smothered out, and they don’t have places to live.”

She said the pollution from the St. Joseph River can be seen some days where the river flows into the lake.

“In the pier area you can see it some days when it’s just a plume of sediment coming in,” she said. “It’s coming from all over (from) urban and agricultural sources throughout the watershed. We need to do a better job of controlling this so we protect not only our local creeks but also Lake Michigan.”

She said Southwest Michigan got \$5.4 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture



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Louise Wrege / HP staff Mike Moran, left, and his son, Brian Moran, look over a display Wednesday about the Black River and Paw Paw River watersheds and how wetlands are important to keep the water in these rivers clean. They took part in the "Productive Lands, Cleaner Water" workshop sponsored by the Berrien Conservation District which was aimed to give farmers ideas on how to manage their lands to create less erosion. The Morans have a farm in Baroda.

through the 2014 Farm Bill to clean up the St. Joseph River watershed.

She said some of that money will be used to restore wetlands that have been lost. Colclough said 72 percent of the wetlands that used to exist in the Ox Creek watershed and 50 percent of the wetlands that used to exist in the St. Joseph River watershed are gone. She said restoring some of the wetlands will help slow down the water so it soaks into the ground and is naturally filtered by the the soil.

“Primarily, we’re looking for agricultural ground ... which has been abandoned because it’s too wet to farm,” said Erin Segar, area resource soil scientist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Grand Rapids. “We, through the program, come in and get it back in a wetland.”

Besides wetland restoration, the money will be used to help farmers implement ways to reduce erosion from their farmland, such as creating grassed waterways and natural buffer zones. Sherman Reed, district conservationist with the USDA Natural Conservation Service Office in Berrien Springs, said stopping erosion not only helps reduce pollution, but saves farmers money.

“Just imagine no vegetation and all of that soil that’s leaving your land that’s costing you money,” he said.

In addition, conservationists from Indiana demonstrated to farmers how tilling the soil year after year breaks it down and makes it more prone to erosion and makes the soil unhealthy.

USDA conservationist Amanda Kautz from the Goshen Service Center in Goshen, Ind., said soil needs to be able to sustain a diverse ecosystem of plants and animals.

“In order to do that, we need soil to be able to infiltrate water,” she said. “We don’t want it ponding on the surface. We want it going down and entering our groundwater and being filtered through that soil. We want it to hold on to some of that water so we have water for the crops and the trees and all the plants.”

She said farmers who use no-till methods of managing farmland end up with healthier soil that filters water.

In one demonstration, she put chunks of tilled soil and non-tilled soil into separate containers of water – both pieces suspended by chicken wire. The chunk of tilled soil immediately started crumbling.

“It can’t hold together,” she said. “There’s not that biological glue there to hold it. There’s not the soil structure that’s built together.”

She said soil farmed through no-till methods build structure to hold it together.

“When you till every year, you’re going to break up the fungus,” she said. “It’s not going to want to live there. You’re going to close your earthworm channels. They’re not going to want to live there. You actually stimulate your bacteria growth and throw off the balance of your biology.”

Contact: lwrege@TheHP.com, 932-0361, Twitter: @HPWrege