

## Sedimental journey

By **JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer** | **Posted: Tuesday, February 17, 2015 5:00 am**

ST. JOSEPH - Every year, enough sediment flows down the St. Joseph River to fill 3,500 trucks, according to U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow.

To stop that tsunami of sludge from clogging harbors and reaching Lake Michigan, Stabenow, along with Michigan Sen. Gary Peters and Indiana Sen. Joe Donnelly, has secured \$6.8 million to help farmers along the 210-mile watershed to keep soil and fertilizer from washing into the river.

"Protecting the Great Lakes is in our DNA. It's our way of life," Stabenow said Monday in announcing the federal funding, which will be matched with \$6.8 million in state and local money for the St. Joseph Watershed Conservation Partnership.

The senators, all Democrats, gathered at Pier 33's boat showroom in St. Joseph to make the announcement.

The five-year project is the biggest investment ever made toward improving water quality in the region, said Stabenow, the ranking Democratic member of the Senate's agriculture committee.

It's an important step in reducing the cost of dredging for the St. Joseph harbors, by reducing the amount of sediment that accumulates there, Peters said.

"The real solution (to funding dredging) is having less sediment going into the river," potentially saving millions, Peters said.

He called protecting the region's water "a sacred trust."

Around 40 million people rely on the Great Lakes for their drinking water, he pointed out.



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U.S. senators, from left, Joe Donnelly, D-Ind., Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., and Gary Peters, D-Mich., on Monday announce a \$6.8 million federal investment to reduce sediment runoff throughout the St. Joseph River watershed. The announcement took place at Pier 33 Marina in St. Joseph. The funding for the project was included in the 2014 Farm Bill, and will be coupled with \$6.8 million in state and local dollars to help farmers take measures to reduce the soil and fertilizers going into the river.

The funding, part of the 2014 farm bill, will be used to provide financial and technical assistance to farmers to take measures to prevent erosion.

Jamie Clover Adams, director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, said this will include planting cover crops and creating buffer strips to keep topsoil and nutrients on the land.

Such measures take land out of crop production, making incentives for farmers necessary, Adams said.

More than 70 percent of the land along the St. Joseph River is in agricultural use, officials said, making farmers an important part of the program.

"I never met a farmer who wanted to see his topsoil wash away," Donnelly said. "I never met a farmer who wanted to see the dollars he spends on fertilizer wash away."

The watershed extends from northern Indiana, through Michigan and bordering 15 counties before emptying into Lake Michigan at St. Joseph.

Marcy Colclough, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said this has been one of the most complex projects she has worked on, with more than 30 local organizations participating with the Michigan and Indiana Departments of Agriculture.

But it is also exciting because of the impact it will have on soil, water and wildlife, Colclough said.

The Department of Agriculture's Jamie Adams said that 80 percent of the local matching funds will come from fees that farmers pay for pesticides and fertilizers, with the remaining 20 percent from state tax revenue.

Instead of receiving a blank check, farmers will be reimbursed for measurable actions, providing accountability, Stabenow said.

The \$6.8 million for the St. Joseph River watershed is part of \$40 million to support conservation projects in Michigan and the Great Lakes region.

The Great Lakes are receiving the largest percentage of the funding for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Stabenow said.

"This will mean a cleaner, better St. Joseph River, and a cleaner, better Lake Michigan," Donnelly said. "Next year it will be cleaner than this year, and it's already pretty darn clean."

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