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THE KANKAKEE RIVER BASIN PARTNERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The presentation will provide a brief history of the Kankakee River Basin and a discussion of its current problems. Information will be provided regarding the outstanding diversity of the area in terms of its flora and fauna and its natural habitats. The threat to this unique ecosystem presented by sedimentation from various sources both within Illinois and Indiana will be explained. The projects already begun and funded through the Conservation 2000 program in the Kankakee Basin will be described and linked to the Kankakee Basin Stewardship Plan's goals and objectives. Specific attention will be given to the "Statewide Project" which is being developed in cooperation with the IDNR, U.S. Corps of Engineers, and Basin Partnership. Once approved and authorized, this project is expected to involve sand bed removal, wetland restoration, and reestablishment of mussel beds in an area of the Kankakee River adjacent to the Indiana - Illinois state line in a remnant of the once huge "Grand Kankakee Marsh". This project will test new technology for sediment removal and other restoration techniques. The presentation will include slides of various features of the Kankakee basin.

INTRODUCTION

From its origin near South Bend, Indiana, the Kankakee River once flowed for 240 miles through numerous bends and oxbows forming the "Grand Kankakee Marsh" a wetland area of some 400,000 acres at the Illinois - Indiana border. After joining its major tributary, the Iroquois River, near Kankakee, the river continues to Wilmington where it has its confluence with the DesPlaines River and forms the headwaters of the Illinois. Today, the "Grand Marsh" exists only as a remnant in the still meandering Illinois segment of the Kankakee known as the Mornence wetlands. Channelization and drainage for agriculture transformed the Indiana segment into an 84 mile long drainage ditch intended to reduce flooding and efficiently dewater farmland. Fortunately, the Illinois portion of the Kankakee still supports a diversity of habitats and unique and endangered flora and fauna. However, sedimentation resulting from channelization and other land use practices in both Illinois and Indiana have had a continuing degrading effect on the Kankakee's ecosystems.

The Kankakee River Basin Partnership has developed a stewardship plan to help in evaluating proposed projects within the basin intended to help preserve and protect the basin's ecology. Many of these projects will be accomplished through the use of funds received from IDNR's Conservation 2000 program.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY and PROBLEMS

As stated in the introduction, there is a significant difference between the condition and ecological value of the Kankakee River basin as it presently exists in the states of Indiana and Illinois. The once meandering Kankakee River and its vast wetlands (nearly 400,000 acres) in Indiana are now farmland and an efficient drainage ditch. However, much of the Kankakee in Illinois has retained its natural state. According to the Illinois EPA's 1996 statewide watershed assessments, the Kankakee / Iroquois River basin is an "exceptional water system" with "good" overall resource quality. This assessment resulted from the Agency's evaluation of a total of 970 stream miles along the Kankakee River and its tributaries. A "good" rating was given to 893 miles (92%) with only 77 stream miles (8%) rated as "fair". This makes the Kankakee / Iroquois basin the highest rated watershed in Illinois.

The assessment lists suspended solids, siltation, and nutrients attributed to agriculture, urban runoff, and contaminated sediments (sediment and / or phosphorous attached to sediments) as the primary causes of water quality degradation in the basin.

The ecological value of the Kanakee and the increasing risk to its preservation have long been an impetus for action by environmental, recreational, and sportsmen's groups within the basin. There have been numerous studies by state agencies over the years which have documented the existence of rare habitats, unique ecosystems, rare and endangered species as well as the presence of at least localized sedimentation problems which impact the basin's water quality and biodiversity. As is often the case, many of those interested in preserving and enhancing the Kanakee's ecology are frustrated by the lack of action by state and federal authorities to address the issues identified as threats to the environmental health of the region. These things take time.

It now appears that real action on several fronts will take place in the not too distant future to begin to resolve the threats to the Kanakee basin and its ecological resources. This statement can be made because the attention of the necessary political, technical, and environmental authorities at the local, state, and federal levels is now focused on the Kanakee Basin and its problems. This came about as a result of several things. In addition to all of the previous studies of the Kanakee, one of the most recent called attention to the increasing sedimentation problems in the basin. The Alliance to Restore the Kanakee (ARK) was formed and raised the 50% local matching funds (about \$250,000) to allow a three phase, multi-year study by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to analyze sedimentation in the river basin. This 1992-1996 study was significant in that it evaluated areas on the Kanakee and Iroquois in both Illinois and Indiana. Previous studies in the basin were limited to evaluating conditions in either one state or the other. In addition, this study was able to combine and correlate new data with historical data from earlier studies performed in the 60's, 70's, and 80's. The USGS study showed that the sedimentation problems were continuing and in certain areas increasing their negative impacts on the basin's ecological health. This study as well as the increased activism of local stakeholders got the attention of state and federal legislators. The Army Corps of Engineers (COE) was authorized to perform a "Reconnaissance Study" of the Kanakee basin to determine the need for further scrutiny in the form of a "Feasibility Study". At this time, the "Recon Study" has been completed and the "Feasibility Study" is underway and will be completed by an engineering firm under contract with the COE. Under federal law, no major environmental restoration projects can be undertaken until a COE "Feasibility Study" has been completed and recommendations made. Therefore, the commencement of the COE Feasibility Study is a major step towards identifying and resolving the Kanakee basin's problems.

KANAKEE RIVER BASIN PARTNERSHIP

A major factor in the progress now being made towards enhancing and restoring the resources of the Kanakee basin is the formation of the Kanakee River Basin Partnership. This group was formed about four years ago as an offshoot of ARK to take advantage of the financial resources available through the IDNR Conservation 2000 Program. The stated goals of the Partnership are to restore, protect, and enhance the high quality, naturally diverse, and productive ecosystems of the Kanakee River Basin. The Partnership is made up of local people who represent a wide range of stakeholders within the Basin including agriculture, conservation, business, industry, labor, recreation and government interests. The monthly meetings of the

group are well attended and at these sessions the 23 voting members conduct business and direct the activities of the organization in accordance with its by-laws. There is always time allotted early in the meeting agenda for input from the general public or any interested parties who wish to present issues for consideration.

One of the most important functions of the Partnership is to solicit, accept and review proposals from stakeholders for various programs and projects to be funded through the C-2000 Program. A subcommittee of the Partnership is charged with the task of evaluating these proposals for compliance with the C-2000 Program eligibility criteria and conformance with the goals established in the Kanakake River Basin Stewardship Plan. In 1998, the Partnership developed a basinwide stewardship plan for management and restoration of the area's natural resources. The plan was composed by combining the EQUIP plans developed by the NRCS Districts in Will, Kanakake, and Iroquois counties with additional features added to reflect the issues and concerns raised by various stakeholders. The Stewardship Plan was adopted in the spring of 1999 after a series of public meetings that allowed input regarding problems and possible solutions from the concerned public. Since its adoption, more than 70 local groups, businesses, and governmental entities have endorsed the Stewardship Plan.

The Stewardship Plan represents a common approach to solving the problems of the Kanakake River Basin and to ensure the protection, preservation, and enhancement of the region's high quality natural resources by private landowners as well as local, state, and federal governmental interests. The main goals of the Plan are:

- 1.) Stabilize the water resources
- 2.) Stabilize the land resources
- 3.) Improve water quality
- 4.) Preserve the high quality natural resource values
- 5.) Restore or enhance native species and degraded habitats
- 6.) Promote natural resources educational opportunities
- 7.) Protect prime farmlands

The Partnership is pledged to achieve these goals in a manner that respects the positions of the various stakeholders while providing a better quality of life for all of the basin's inhabitants.

C-2000 SUCCESSES

In 1998, IDNR granted the Partnership nearly \$1 million in C-2000 funds to complete several projects in the basin. The authorized projects ranged in cost from nearly \$190,000 for conservation easements and management plans to create riparian buffers along tributary streams in Iroquois county, to \$8,500 for repair of gullies and erosion control at a site owned by the Bourbonnais Twp. Park District in Kanakake County. Another major project at a cost of \$40,000 involves selective removal of logjams at 12-15 locations along Langham Creek in Iroquois County. These flow obstructions result in severe erosion of the banks and bottom of the creek which even in its current state, is known to be an important nursery stream for sportfish.

C-2000 funds in the amount of \$160,000 were awarded for completion of an erosion site map of the Kankakee River from LaPort, In. to the I-55 bridge in Illinois near Wilmington. These sites will be identified on maps and their exact locations fixed by Global Positioning Technology. In addition, existing hydrological, hydraulic, and channel geometry data will be compiled. This data will be a very valuable tool for the COE feasibility study's problem assessment and recommendation process. Perhaps the most ambitious project funded in 1998 was a land acquisition proposal brought to the Partnership by the Kankakee River Conservancy District (a unit of the Kankakee County government). This proposal, funded at \$595,360, will purchase lands from willing sellers in the "Mormence Wetlands" which will be managed by the Conservancy District in conformance with the Stewardship Plan. This area is a remnant of the huge Grand Kankakee Marsh which once encompassed 400,000 acres.

The Partnership's C-2000 success continued in 1999 with nearly \$90,000 awarded to complete agricultural BMP projects such as grassed waterways and terraces to control runoff from sites in Will County. Funding was also provided to restore wetland areas along tributary streams and to stabilize 1,000 feet of eroding shoreline on the Kankakee River near Wilmington, Illinois.

OTHER SUCCESSES

The Partnership had a significant part in inducing the Illinois legislature and then governor Edgar to release a special \$1.5 million appropriation to the IDNR to use to fund land acquisitions in the critical Mormence wetlands and other riparian areas of the Kankakee and Iroquois Rivers. Another particularly exciting development involves a special, fast tracked Corps of Engineers project to be performed at the Illinois / Indiana state line. Called the "State Line Kankakee River Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration", this project is being managed by the Chicago COE office and will be subject to the COE's Section 206 Program requirements. Under these rules, its implementation can proceed on a schedule independent of the basinwide feasibility study. Actual construction could begin within two years. The proposed project features would restore aquatic habitat (fisheries, mussels, wetlands) by removing sediment, creating wetland habitat, creating a controlled sediment removal area (sediment trap) and potentially creating new or enhancing existing spawning areas. A constructed wetland with an access channel to the river would introduce fish habitat and potential spawning features to an area currently used as an agricultural field. The access channel will be designed to incorporate substrate suitable for establishing a mussel population. Excavated materials and brush and trees removed as part of the project will be put to beneficial use in berm construction and habitat development as much as possible. New technology is to be utilized for sediment removal which has been shown to be highly efficient in solids removal while having significantly less disruptive impacts on the removal area's ecosystem and with much lower levels of resuspension of sediments which impact downstream locations. It is hoped that the State line project will illustrate successful methodologies and cost efficient techniques that can then be utilized in other restoration projects.

BUILDING FUTURE SUCCESS

The Partnership hopes to continue its success in winning C-2000 funding for additional projects in future years. The Partnership will continue to seek input from its member stakeholders and solicit proposals from appropriate sources within the Kankakee basin. These proposed projects will be evaluated for their compliance with the C-2000 Program requirements and the goals and objectives of the Stewardship Plan. We are encouraged by the apparent willingness of the Illinois legislature to continue to fund the C-2000 Program for additional years. However, it would be unrealistic to expect that this source of funding will be adequate and available long enough to address all of the needs identified in the basin. Clearly, other financial resources will need to be tapped in order to achieve the goals set forth in the Stewardship Plan. This realization and the more immediate short term need to find sources of operating funds resulted in the creation of the Partnership's Alternative Funding Committee. The Partnership has relied on the charity of its active membership for completing the routine administrative tasks such as reproduction, mailings, taxes, etc. that are required to successfully pursue its activities. It would be much more efficient and certainly less stressful if an adequate operating fund could be established to finance these tasks. The committee has begun contacting charitable organizations and foundations involved with sponsoring environmental programs and activities. It is hoped that a "benefactor" can be found to provide operating funds for the day to day, year to year workings of the Partnership.

Past efforts to develop and implement conservation projects in the Kankakee basin have been unsuccessful for the most part. The failure to solicit meaningful input from all parties who have a stake in the area and to fully inform the general public about the issues certainly was a major reason for the demise of these well intentioned efforts. The members of the Partnership realize that the real strength of the organization lies in its diversity. The broad representation presented by its membership allows for realistic discussion of the pros and cons of all proposals and issues that come before the partnership for action. Rather than having limited insight into how certain programs and issues will impact the stakeholders within the basin, the monthly Partnership meetings allow all points of view to be expressed. This results in spirited discussion and yes, even conflict, but it is this activity by concerned and committed stakeholders that creates improved plans of action. It would be futile to attempt to implement preservation and reclamation projects such as those being undertaken in the Kankakee Basin without broad based support of those whose interests may be significantly affected.

The Kankakee River Basin Partnership has learned from the mistakes of the past and is positioned to move ahead with the vision presented in its Stewardship Plan to preserve, enhance, and protect the ecological assets of the highest quality watershed in the State of Illinois.