

News

Slowing the flow of run-off

State, county and local groups work to reduce erosion in the watershed

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State, county and local officials gathered for a meeting of the Lake Superior Binational Forum at Northland College Friday to discuss ongoing efforts to control erosion and improve water quality in the Lake Superior Basin.

Carmen Wagner is a forestry hydrologist with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources out of Rhinelander. She spoke about research from a three-year project that included 12 watersheds in Douglas, Ashland, Bayfield and Iron counties. The project aimed to shed a light on ways to slow the flow of stormwater run-off into the streams within the watershed.

Research revealed that more erosion was taking place in the stream, carrying pollutants like sand and silt into the Chequamegon Bay instead of chemicals or farm run-off being carried into it. The study also identified that run-off increased two to three times near lands that had been clear-cut or had forests fewer than 15 years old.

"That sediment or that dirt that was in the fish bank covers up the gravel spawning beds that the fish use. Then, they're no longer able to hatch young fish," Wagner said, adding that it can also affect the gills of fish.

Although erosion in streams is natural, Wagner said they're seeing more of it occurring now. "Our different land use practices are causing the streams to erode more and at heavier rates."

Wagner said the culprits range from road run-off and farm fields to different forestry practices.

"Each arena is trying to come up with different ways to address that, and we're all coming up with different solutions. We're all working toward this together, but we all owe a little bit of the responsibility also."

Wagner said they're trying to work with private landowners to keep the water on the land in order to protect fish and water quality. However, management practices like planting more trees or breaking agricultural drainage systems can be costly or time-consuming.

"A big concern is the cost of the practices. That is something we need to be very aware of," Wagner noted. "Some of these practices can be free. Other ones can be more expensive. Doing some of the stormwater practices, if they're putting in ponds, those can be expensive and have long-term maintenance needs also."

Wagner said they surveyed 900 woodland owners about water quality in the Lake Superior Basin and about half responded. Of those who participated, 86 percent said they would take part in management practices to protect the watershed. Partners at the Wisconsin DNR, county land conservation departments and volunteer groups are working together to get the word out to landowners and townships on ways they can slow the flow of run-off.

"We'd really like to see educated landowners understanding how different practices affect water quality in the Lake Superior Basin and just an understanding of different things we can do to help protect water quality."

Michele Wheeler is the executive director of the Bad River Watershed Association. The non-profit group has been doing its part by replacing and putting in culverts at various road and stream crossings throughout Ashland and Bayfield counties. In fact, the group received around \$55,000 in stimulus funds last year that's been spread across three restoration projects at stream and road crossings in the two counties.

"Roads are the natural interface with streams for most people; it's a point of entry," Wheeler said. "They're a place where you can have some really big impacts on both stream channels and the fish that live there."

Wheeler noted that roads can impact how fish move up the stream and how sediment comes into the water. "So, it's important because every one of those crossings influences what's going on downstream and what's going on upstream. We have to take a look at those to be able to take a look at what's going on in the watershed overall."

The association has been doing outreach to encourage townships to take part in restoration efforts. "We went into it without really big expectations the first five or six times we talked to people, but then you start building relationships," Wheeler said. "You can work together on projects."

She believes part of the reason people welcome the projects is that they're not being asked to foot the bill.

"We're saying, 'Hey, we think this is important, and we may have some funding to help.' That funding is really seed money to demonstrate how this can work," Wheeler stated, noting that spending extra money upfront on bigger pipes at road crossings (rather than using smaller pipes which often divert the natural course of the stream) may save townships funds in the long run.

"These road crossings are constantly putting sediment into the streams. They can blow out and cause mass failure."

Not only that, Wheeler said many pipes are located high up off the ground, which prevents access to upstream habitats for fish. She said they often see that in the transition zone.

The transition zone is the area that separates the northern portion of the watershed, which is sandy and higher in elevation, from the red clay plain in the lower watershed. Wheeler said they usually see big drops at the end of pipes where stream and road crossings meet as they move further down from the higher elevations of the watershed.

Wheeler said some fish simply can't make the jump. "If they can't get up there, they don't have access to that good spawning habitat," she said, meaning fewer fish overall. Townships can combat the problem by purchasing bigger pipes for road crossings and putting them in a little bit closer to the stream.

Bruce Lindgren is the U.S. co-chair of the Lake Superior Binational Forum. Lindgren said getting the public involved is crucial to improving things like water quality in the Lake Superior Basin.

"I don't think the management agencies can ever have the scope and capability that citizen groups can have," Lindgren said. "They're restricted. Their funding is restricted. They often have responsibilities for such large geographic areas that they can't get around to take care of all these projects. Many times their responsibilities are spread across a whole spectrum of things that need to be done."

Meanwhile, he adds locals will take pride in preserving and protecting the areas in which they live. "The more we can find ways for citizens to make commitments to protection and restoration, the more

of that that's going to get done and the faster it's going to get done."
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