

River advocates form plan to clean Genesee

Steve Orr, Staff writer 4:56 p.m. EDT April 28, 2014



(Photo: MAX SCHULTE staff photographer, Staff file photo 2009)

It's taken a couple of centuries to make a mess of the mighty Genesee. It'll take a while to clean it up.

The latest steps toward a cleaner river are in the works, however. The Genesee River Watch, a campaign that convened a well-attended summit in Rochester in February to plot Genesee remediation strategy, has selected the first projects it hopes to undertake.

One would address agricultural runoff by studying cover crops, which prevent valuable soil from eroding, in Livingston County. The other would focus on riverbank stabilization, also to combat erosion, in Allegany County.

Volunteers are now working with government officials and residents in both locations to hone plans for the two undertakings. The idea is to make progress one step, or two, at a time.

"We're trying to get projects we can do now that people can rally around," said George Thomas, executive director of the Center for Environmental Initiatives, which is leading the river watch program. "It's going to take years, and many projects."

Neither of the first two projects is funded yet. Thomas said the campaign intends to apply this summer for New York state grants through the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council.

The Genesee River Watch was started by the [environmental center](#), a not-for-profit with offices in Brighton, to kick-start remediation of problem spots along the river. For inspiration, it drew on a detailed new study by Joseph Makarewicz and other researchers at The College at Brockport that identified the sources of pollutants in the river.

In truth, the river is cleaner than it once was, owing in good part to the elimination of large sources of pollution in the Rochester urban area.

But it remains far less than it should be. As the study documented, the Genesee still carries too much phosphorus and suspended soil, or sediment, among other undesirable contaminants. The study tracked their origin and found that 42 percent of phosphorus came from farming, 40 percent from natural sources and 12 percent from sewage treatment plants in the counties south of Monroe.

Much of the sediment and phosphorus enters the river in Allegany and southern Livingston and Wyoming counties, home to steep and easily eroded riverbanks and numerous large dairy farms.

Removing phosphorus and other pollutants from the river is a worthy end in itself, but it also would benefit Lake Ontario. The river is a significant source of pollution in the lake, with the phosphorus helping fuel the growth of algae that frequently foul local beaches.

The Genesee deposits 206 tons of phosphorus and 442,000 tons of sediment each year into Lake Ontario, the study found.

Despite a nasty winter that kept at least one out-of-town guest from flying in, about 185 people from 80 environmental, citizen and government groups attended the Feb. 6 summit, with many making the drive from the Upper Genesee area far to the south.

"That worked out very well," Thomas said.

After learning about the study's findings, they broke into groups to decide which sources of pollutants should be attacked first.

One would be to conduct a three-year test of cover crops, conducted on fields totaling about 2,000 acres, Thomas said. It would be done somewhere in the watershed of Canaseraga Creek, a major Genesee River tributary in Livingston and Allegany counties.

"When you don't have your cash crop in, when you have already harvested, you can plant a cover crop, so you always have something growing with a root system in the soil," Thomas said. The cover helps keep nutrients in the soil, and slows runoff that can carry soil and pollutants into the river.

Not all farmers use them, with one reason being they're not sure which crop to plant or when to plant it. Thomas said the river watch hopes to answer those questions during the three-year test.

"That project is going along pretty well," Thomas said.

The test fields haven't been found yet, but he doesn't think that will be difficult. The pilot project will cost \$400,000 to \$500,000, he said.

The other endeavor is riverbank stabilization, which can be accomplished with stones, timbers, concrete bulkheads or planting of natural grasses and trees. The land surrounding the river in its southern reaches is easily eroded in many spots, especially at bends in the waterway bordered by farm fields or meadows.

Two Allegany County locations were being considered, he said, one at Houghton and one farther south. The scope of that project isn't set yet and there is no cost estimate.

"The Genesee River is constantly cutting away agricultural soils, and it's washed down the river to Lake Ontario," Thomas said. "It's a concern from the farmer's standpoint because he's losing his land to the river. But it's not a cheap thing to fix. It's an expensive proposition to take on."

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An eroding bank along the Genesee River in Allegany County. Riverbanks such as these are candidates for remedial projects.(Photo: Will Smith, The College at Brockport)