

Keeping watch over precious soil

Stewardship crucial to urban effort

By Criss Wilson

The Hawk Eye

It doesn't look like much. A little gully or a rivulet washing dirt over the curb, into the street, down the sewer.

But consider this: Add up all those gullies and you'd be watching 5.4 million tons of soil being washed away per acre per year. Dump that soil into boxcars instead and the train would stretch from Los Angeles to New York City and back again, according to Department of Natural Resources Conservation Service figures.

Add another 1.3 million tons per acre annually for wind erosion and there's a lot of dust in the wind and dirt in the drain.

That is the national average. Locally, the numbers probably are less, according to those with an eye on the ground. But they do agree that large amounts of soil are sliding into the Mississippi River and its tributaries, along with their cover of pesticides and herbicides. Water quality declines with each rainfall.

The finger of blame has traditionally been pointed at farmers. Only 10 percent of the county's 261,760 acres are urban. Of the remaining 90 percent, 70 percent of those are in row crops.

But that finger may be pointing in the wrong direction.

"Acre for acre, urban residents use more lawn chemicals and pesticides than rural residents," Des Moines County Naturalist Sharon Kaufman said. "Person for person, acre for acre, urban residents contribute more pesticides and herbicides than rural residents."

Unwittingly, it would seem.

Government programs such as the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly the Soil Conservation Service) have taught agricultural land users the basics of good land practices. Each ounce of rural topsoil lost carries a dollar amount. Less soil means lower productivity, fewer bushels of corn and soybeans. Using more pesticides and



John Stoops/The Hawk Eye

Mike Lewitke of the Natural Resources Conservation Service stands in front of several barriers along U.S. 61 south of Burlington used to prevent gully erosion. Without the barriers, such erosion would allow tons of sediment to dump into the stream and eventually destabilize nearby infrastructure.

Conservation district marks 50 years

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It occurred to W.E. Whicher that Des Moines County was the only county in the three southern tiers of the state without a soil conservation district.

That was Aug. 4, 1945, and the Danville farmer made the point at a county Farm Bureau meeting.

By January, the county had one and three commissioners were elected. John L. Blaul of Pleasant Grove Township, Noah Schrock of Huron Township and Edwin Cling of Yellow Spring Township took on the task of urging fellow farmers to save their topsoil for generations to come.

This year will be the Des Moines County Soil and Water Conservation District's 50th anniversary. The current commissioners, now numbering five, will have an open house 10:30 to 1:30

■The Des Moines County Soil and Water Conservation District commissioners will have a 50th anniversary open house from 10:30 to 1:30 p.m. Friday at the NRC office, 1104 Derek Lincoln Drive, West Burlington. There will be a short program at noon. Refreshments will be served.

p.m. Friday at the office next door to Bickel's Bicycle and Fitness Shop on Agency Road in West Burlington.

Serving six-year terms are Sherman Smith, Burlington Township; Jeff Bergman, Union Township; Frank Hedges, Huron Township; Tom Birkenstock, Franklin Township; and Don Lounsbury, Pleasant Grove Township.

The district's purpose is to protect

soil and water resources and was born with the legacy of the Dust Bowl years.

How this is done has changed over the years. Focusing first on rural landowners, where 90 percent of the county property exists, was the primary focus.

In the past five years, the focus has shifted to landowners in urban areas, where on an acre-to-acre basis soil erosion has climbed above rural land figures.

The hope is to turn those numbers around to match those in the rural sector. Better land planning and more education are the basics.

"Of all the environmental indicators — water, wildlife, soil — soil conservation is the only indicator holding its own," Commissioner Jeff Bergman said.

Funding for the program comes largely from statewide REAP funds with assistance from donations.

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herbicides than necessary means rising chemical prices. With tight profit margins, farmers usually are eager to comply with NRCS suggestions or research available options to contain costs.

"That same sort of information wasn't available for urban residents," said Kaufman, one of the county's leading environmental watchdogs. "What almost always happens is when there's a problem with water quality the finger is always pointed at agriculture and agribusiness."

Almost everything an urban landowner puts on the lawn eventually ends up in the same place that rural runoff does, which is the Mississippi River. Every ounce of dirt washed away from land stripped of vegetation goes to the same watery grave.

And while there are regulations to control that contamination, local officials responsible for monitoring land and water quality suspect education will lead to cleaner rivers and less soil loss.

"Stewardship is the key word," said Jeff Bergman, treasurer of the Des Moines County Soil and Conservation District.

A legacy of the Depression-era Dust Bowl, the Soil and Conservation District will be cel-

ebrating its 50th anniversary this year. The traditionally rural focus has been shifting in the past five years as agribusiness gets a grip on its ground and city dwellers begin to see their slip out from under their feet.

Most of the measurable urban land loss is in road construction and building developments. State laws prohibit property owners from changing land configurations to the detriment of neighbors. And city officials now ask contractors to file erosion control and grading plans, according to Mark Brockway, Burlington's development director.

"Basically we've used some good common sense to minimize erosion," Brockway said.

And on at least one recent project — the Westbrook Subdivision — they've required contractors to have someone on site keeping an eye out for potential environmental problems.

Work on the Lowe's project, the other major land-moving event in Burlington, also involved a city-approved erosion control and grading plan.

Erosion control hasn't always been at the top of the development priority list, Brockway said.

"I think we're moving in the right direction," Brockway said. "As time goes by we're trying to improve."

A better flow of information and education is necessary for that improvement. Mike Lewitke, district conservationist for the USDA's Natural Re-

sources Conservation Service, said his agency is making inroads on the urban conservation front.

"We looked at who we were servicing and it was such a small percentage of the community," Lewitke said. "We can't operate in a vacuum. While most of what we're trying to protect is in the rural area you can't ignore the urban."

While farmers have long checked in with his agency for advice, largely in part because conservation plans have been tied to subsidy payments since the 1985 Farm Bill, NRCS also looks over those erosion and grading plans Brockway has coming across his desk.

"Back when we started in the 1940s we had a high soil loss," Lewitke said.

The amount of topsoil lost has slowed dramatically over the years. From 1982 to 1992, Iowa farmers using conservation practices saved 100 million more tons of topsoil, enough to fill a convoy of dump trucks 105 wide, parked bumper to bumper from Council Bluffs to Davenport.

Stewardship, taking responsibility for the land, was the key. Education and information made it possible, according to Lewitke. That same approach likely will be used for urban conservation planning.

"When we talk about urban conservation we have to start at the very beginning," Brockway said. "It's going to have to be done locally."