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Cedar River concerns bring rural, urban partners together



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By Dave DeWitte

The growing nitrate and flooding problems along the Cedar River are bringing together rural and urban interests together to improve soil and water quality in Iowa.

The Middle Cedar River Partnership Project is a new coalition of 16 different organizations and governmental agencies, including conservation districts, environmental groups and agricultural associations. Partners will spend the next five years identifying and implementing projects to address nitrate levels and water levels in several stretches of the Middle Cedar River, according to Steve Hershner, the city's utilities director.

The partnership was formally announced Jan. 15 after receiving \$2 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). It is one of only 100 projects funded nationwide in the program's first round, and only two in Iowa.

The city of Cedar Rapids is the lead agency in the partnership, and has reached out to other government agencies at the federal, state and local levels, as well as to groups like the Wisconsin-based Sand County Foundation, which provides technical assistance with watershed challenges.

Mr. Hershner said the partners have pledged \$2.3 million in financial or in-kind assistance. The ability to leverage that much local support helped elevate the grant application in the eyes of the USDA, he believes.

A decision was made by the partners to apply for funding under a pool of RCPP funds set aside for state regional programs, because of the city's interest in controlling water flow. Although it contained only 25 percent of the program's dollars, that pool was the only one that considered water infiltration and retention as grant-scoring factors.

The RCPP program "is a really important change in the way the USDA is delivering conservation dollars," said Susan Heathcote, water quality coordinator for the Iowa Environmental Council.

The success of the Middle Cedar Partnership both in securing federal dollars and implementing its program will be closely watched in Iowa by other local governments interested in the grant program, she said.

"Before, they (the USDA) specifically targeted individual landowners," Ms. Heathcote said. "This is continuing, but a greater share of dollars are now being prioritized for these targeted regional initiatives."

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The Middle Cedar River Partnership "will develop a watershed management plan for a couple of impaired reaches of the Upper Cedar, after which the watershed will be eligible for a number of different funding sources under the EPA's 319 program," said Joseph Britt, program director for the Sand County Foundation in Madison, Wis. Section 319 is a portion of the federal Clean Water Act regulating nonpoint sources of water pollution.

Landowners will receive training and partial financial assistance for strategies including cover crops, wetlands, bioreactors and nutrient management, according to Adam Kiel, water resources coordinator for the Iowa Soybean Association.

Converting marginal, flooded farmland into wetlands could help slow the release of runoff into the river and reduce downstream flooding. Cover crops such as rye and oats are planted in the fall and help hold the soil and nutrients in place until spring crops are planted.

Nutrient management strategies focus on adjusting the rate, timing and form of nutrients applied to the soil to optimize crop growth while minimizing the loss of valuable fertilizers in runoff, Mr. Kiel said.

Bioreactors can be installed where drainage tiles come out of the ground to "denitrify" runoff water by running it through a trench filled with wood chips up to 80 feet long.

"This isn't going to solve all the problems on the Cedar (River)," Mr. Kiel said. "This is a start and a good way to get farmers and landowners engaged."

He said the programs are expected to pay 50 to 70 percent of a landowner's costs for the implementing the measures.

The project is expected to address about 13,000 acres in the watershed, much of it in the area between Vinton and Waterloo, according to Mr. Hershner. The portions of the project that slow water runoff, such as wetlands, are expected to begin in the latter part of the five-year project time frame because they take longer and cost more to implement.

Rising awareness

The partnership was created at a time when landowners as well as urban dwellers are becoming more interested in water quality issues, according to Marty Adkins, assistant state conservationist for the USDA's National Resources Conservation Service.

"There's a growing awareness of water quality and a growing awareness of the benefits of soil management to build resiliency," Mr. Adkins said. Resiliency refers to the soil's ability to withstand climate extremes such as drought and flooding, while continuing to produce crops.

Climate change is widely expected to increase the frequency of both drought and flooding in Iowa, according to Ms. Heathcote. She is confident that rainfall patterns like those that caused flooding in Eastern Iowa in 2008 will return.

"We'll see that kind of rain again," Ms. Heathcote said. "The question is, will we have changed our management of the landscape to mitigate the peak flows?"

The initiative's unveiling took place shortly after the Des Moines Water Works indicated it may sue upstream counties for failure to control nitrate runoff.

Cedar Rapids' water utility has not had the nitrate levels in its wells that have necessitated the treatment costs in Des Moines, according to Mr. Hershner. He said the city's underground wells pull water from aquifers charged by the Cedar River.

"Our source water does exceed 10 milligrams per liter on some occasions and the EPA definition is that we are a groundwater that is directly under the influence of surface water," Mr. Hershner said. Instead of treating on those occasions, Mr. Hershner said the water department adjusts the balance of the wells from which it is pulling water to meet the nitrate level thresholds.

The city has already begun to evaluate nitrate treatment options for its two water treatment plants, however.

Some have criticized Des Moines Water Works for a litigious approach and praised Cedar Rapids for its cooperative approach with landowners on nitrate runoffs.

Ms. Heathcote said the differences in approaches may be warranted. Landowners in the Cedar River watershed experienced extensive erosion and damage, along with the cities along the river in 2008, Ms. Heathcote said, and are more motivated to come to the table with the cities than landowners in the Raccoon River watershed above Des Moines.

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