

Corps studies sediment problem

By The Associated Press

Some folks call the Kankakee River the cleanest river in the state, yet sediment is so thick in places it is killing off the walleye.

Now, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is studying what to do about it.

"We've put in 20 or 25 years of hard work without seeing a lot of progress, or even being able to get the door open. Now the door is open," said J.R. Black, chairman of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership.

The causes of the problem are so complex and long-standing that they defy any quick fix, but the river's supporters are heartened by the planned study.

The Kankakee originates in Indiana and meanders generally westward for about 60 miles in Illinois before it joins the Des Plaines River near Channahon, forming the Illinois River.

The root of the problem traces back to around 1860, the start of efforts to create new cropland by draining Indiana's 500,000 acre Grand Marsh.

The Indiana portion of the river was straightened and channeled, and drainage ditches were built to siphon off additional water from the wetlands. That meant more sediment in the river, and a faster current to carry it.

But the river meanders in Illinois, so when the swift waters reach the state line, they slow considerably and begin to dump the suspended particles. The problem was first noticed in the 1950s, and has only grown.

Flooding of farmland and homes has worsened because the excess sediments filling the riverbed means less room for

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water, which more easily overflows banks and levees, Black said. The sediment also clogs intakes for public water supplies.

The Kankakee is a popular fishing stream, but while smallmouth bass are still plentiful, the walleye fishery in the river's lower reaches appears to be in decline because the spawning areas are being covered by more sand. It's touted as the cleanest

stream in the state, but the stream is dying in its ability to support life," said Terry Johnston, a Kankakee architect who represents Ducks Unlimited on the partnership board.

Among the possible solutions are selective dredging in the Illinois portion of the river between the state line and the Mokena Wetlands, where several hundred thousand tons of sand and sediment are layered. Another step would be sand traps that divert part of the water flow over unusable land, where

sediment will filter out before the water is directed back to the river.

On the Indiana side, officials plan to redirect the channel into some curved and curled streambeds in an attempt to slow down the water and dump more sediment before it reaches Illinois.

U.S. Reps. Jerry Weller, a Morris Republican who is a native of Dwight, Tom Ewing, a Pontiac Republican, and Steve Buyer, an Indiana Republican, recently secured \$450,000 in federal and state money to pay for the Army Corps study.