

# Feds, states work on watershed issues

By Bill Byrns

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While federal agencies continue planning, actual action to preserve the Kankakee River is already being taken by Illinois and Indiana.

Spearheading efforts in Illinois are land acquisitions and easements made possible by Gov. George Ryan and the state's Conservation 2000 program.

Working as partners in the process are the Kankakee River Basin Partnership and the Kankakee River Conservancy District, a local river agency from Momence east.

In Indiana, the state-funded Kankakee River Basin Commission and the independent grassroots Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project are involved in acquisitions and easements, each to meet its own objectives.

Also buying conservation land in both states is the Nature Conservancy.

## In Illinois

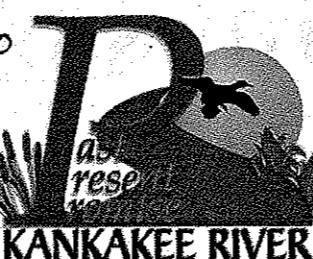
The Momence Wetlands, lying just west of the Indiana state line, has been the focus of state-funded acquisitions by the local conservancy district.

To date, the district has secured seven of nine parcels that will total some 1,700 wetland acres. The acquisitions may later qualify as local cost-sharing in Corps of Engineering projects.

The Momence area also is one part of a larger plan being put into action by the Kankakee River Partnership.

Since forming as a Conservation 2000 ecosystem partnership nearly three years ago, the panel has won state funding for 29 different projects in Kankakee and Iroquois counties.

Six projects have been completed, eight others were dropped at the request of local landowners, and 15 projects re-



main active.

Most of the work involves buffer strips along streams to control runoff and sedimentation. Other projects include updating data on the river by the Illinois State Water Survey.

The Kankakee Basin Partnership has proved to be one of the most successful ecosystem partnerships in winning state funds. It is also considered a model at building an effective alliance among conservation, agriculture, business and labor groups.

"It means a lot of give and take on issues," admits Chairman J.R. Black "but it's also what helps us to succeed."

Black says the partnership has made solid accomplishments in dealing with watershed issues but admits it will take state and federal money to solve the river's problems.

"Sand and sediment are the river's greatest threat — there's no doubt about that," he said. "We need to be able to work with the Corps and Fish and Wildlife to make sure that local people have a voice in the process."

Black represents the partnership and streams biologist Jim Mick represents the Illinois Department of Natural Resources in dealing with the Corps' river basin study. They also join in meetings between the Corps, FWS and their counterparts in Indiana, the Kankakee River Basin Commission and the Indiana DNR.

## In Indiana

The Kankakee River Basin

Commission of Indiana was "created by the Indiana General Assembly to deal with flood control and drainage issues," said Jodi Melton, KRBC's executive director. "We have evolved into a planning agency for a variety of issues beyond flood control."

KRBC projects include traps to remove sand from the Yellow River and the upper reaches of the Kankakee. Seven others are in the planning stage on the Kankakee between LaPorte and Starke counties.

The traps are simple holes cut in the river bottom that are allowed to fill with sand which then is removed.

"We've always known that the Yellow River is a major source of sedimentation to the Kankakee," Melton said. "Over the past year, we know we're catching sand because the traps are about half full, but we haven't had any major storms or flooding to move it along."

The KRBC also has purchased the 600-acre River's Edge farm in Porter County, portions of which are being used for wetlands restoration and flood control.

KRBC has also purchased 200 acres near Shelby, where they hope to build an off-channel sediment trap for the Kankakee if funding is approved in Indianapolis.

"This site could also fit the Corps of Engineers' plans for an off-channel control area," Melton said, adding that in that case, the project could qualify as part of the state's cost-share on future work.

Perhaps nowhere on the Kankakee is flooding a more immediate concern than at tiny Summava Resorts.

Bounded by the river to the north, U.S. Route 41 to the west, and levees and a railroad line, the area's 115 homes lie at the mercy of deteriorating earthen levees.



Journal/Wayne Baranowski

**RARE OAKS** overshadow a corn field in northwestern Pembroke Township. The 148 acres of rare black oak savanna were purchased in July by the Illinois Nature Conservancy. Nationwide, the black oak savannas are rare with less than 1 percent surviving.

"The Corps is looking to build a \$7 million ring levee at Summava," Melton said. Newton County has already set aside \$400,000 for the work. KRBC's share would be \$2.5 million."

Unsure if the financially strapped commission could win such a grant from the state, Melton has asked the Corps to review the plans to cut costs if possible.

KRBC has also worked as a partner with the Indiana Grand Kankakee Marsh Restoration Project by helping to buy a 300-acre wetlands restoration site in Porter County.

The marsh project has so far purchased eight properties totaling over 2,800 acres for wetlands restoration.

Like the river partnership in Illinois, the marsh project's success has been due to building an

effective coalition that includes state and federal agencies and private businesses including Northern Indiana Public Services Corporation, which has put at least 600 acres into wetlands preservation and has supported the project in other ways.

Funding also included two \$1 million grants from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act to help the Grand Marsh Project meet its goal of acquiring 26,500 acres for restoration.

The Nature Conservancy is now transforming nearly 5,000 of the 7,200 acres it owns in Newton County from farmland into wetlands. The \$11 million purchase in 1996 included land once owned by Bourbonnais banker Merlin Karlock and later by Prudential Insurance.

The huge tract lies just north

of Willow Slough and northeast from the Iroquois County Conservation Area in Illinois. The acquisition links Willow Slough State Fish & Wildlife Area on the south to the Beaver Lake Prairie Chicken Preserve northeast and to the Conrad Savanna Nature Preserve to the northwest.

The Nature Conservancy's Illinois chapter purchased 148 acres of rare black oak savanna last July in northern Pembroke Township. The acquisition also includes a permanent easement on 18.36 acres of nearby woodland.

Less than 1 percent of the nation's original black oak savannas survive, with Pembroke Township having the highest concentration of the rare habitat in the nation. The Conservancy has expressed interest in preserving other sites in the area.