

Big cats

■ Four mountain lions were removed from a Manhattan Township home in Will County. Page D2.

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Sand removal for river moves ahead

By Bill Byrns

Journal writer

Pieces of the sand-plagued, shape-shifting puzzle known as the Kankakee River are rapidly starting to fall into place.

Thursday morning, federal, state and local officials laid down a key piece of that puzzle in announcing that plans are underway to remove sand from a section of the river near the Indiana state line.

At that site lies an estimated 133,600 cubic yards of sand says Congressman Jerry Weller citing a recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey. The sandy mass inching slowly downstream from the state line bridge is believed to be the largest sediment area along the upper river in Illinois.

"Restoration of the Kankakee River is a top priority and this sand removal is the first step," Weller said.

Expectations are that the project will use a vacuum-like pumping system to remove sand from the river bottom without causing undue disruption to the stream. The project also includes restoration of the river's natural hydrology, aquatic habitat and adjoining wetlands near the state line and the reintroduction of native mussels to that portion of the river.

Exactly how those goals will be met and how much sand will be removed will be detailed in June when a preliminary restoration plan for the project is promised for public inspection.

Unlike most U.S. Army Corps of Engineers programs, the state line project is expected to move quickly through its planning and feasibility stages. Work is slated to begin in the summer of 2001 according to Dudley Hudson, a deputy district engineer with the Corps of Engineers.

Joining Weller and Hudson at a Momence City Hall press conference Thursday were Brent Manning, director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and J.R. Black,



Journal/Bill Byrns

ON THE BANKS OF A RAGING RIVER, federal, state and local officials gathered Thursday at Momence to announce the start of sand removal efforts at the Kankakee River state line. Comparing notes after their press conference are, from left, Dudley Hudson, deputy district engineer from the Rock Island Corps of Engineers office, J. R. Black, chairman of the Kankakee River Partnership Alliance, Brent Manning, director of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Rep. Jerry Weller of Morris.

chairman of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership.

All are partners in the aquatic ecosystem restoration project which is funded up to \$5 million or 65 percent by the Corps with the remaining funds coming from DNR and the state's Conservation 2000 program.

While most conservationists see the sand removal effort as a positive first step at least one river advocate, *Sportsman's Letter* publisher Ed Mullady of Kankakee, describes it as seeming "more like political grandstanding than anything to help the river."

Mullady asks what good removing sand will do if it is only to be left to fill up again?

"Has anyone involved given an accurate estimate as to how fast this

dredged hole in the river will fill back up? Is constant maintenance going to take place?"

"I want the sand bed load reduced as much as anyone," Mullady says but adds that "it has to be done correctly."

Hudson says most of those questions will be addressed in the restoration planning process now underway. All involved — Weller, Hudson, Manning and Black vow the planning process will be open to local input.

"The key to success here is that this project is locally led," Weller said.

"This project will give us a guidance tool for future work," Black said, "it will become a benchmark for future restoration along the Kankakee and other rivers in Illinois."

And while the state line project is seen as a short term effort, Hudson said the Corp's aquatic ecosystem program could be an effective tool for additional projects along the river.

Answers to Mullady's query about stopping more sand from flowing downstream lie upstream along the river in Indiana.

Attending Thursday's meeting were Jack Nelson, president, and Jodi Melton, executive director of the Indiana Kankakee River Basin Commission.

Illinois is currently negotiating to buy land owned by Nelson and the Nelson family trust for the sand removal project.

The Hoosier river panel won \$1 million last year to install sediment traps on the Yellow River, a major tributary of the Kankakee in Marshall County. However such work for Kankakee River projects comes from that state's General Assembly and is largely dedicated to maintaining the existing levee system along the river and its tributaries.

Last year, the Kankakee River Partnership was awarded nearly \$1.5 million in state funds for work in the Momence Wetlands and in Iroquois County.

State funding for local ecosystem projects has increasingly become a key element in pushing federal action on the Kankakee River. Those funds will be used to secure land for the sand removal and wetland restoration work near the state line.

The state is also a partner in the Corps' broader study of sedimentation and flood control problems in both Illinois and Indiana.

Weller, aided by U.S. Reps. Tom Ewing of Illinois and Steve Buyer of Indiana, won \$940,000 to continue the Corps' basin-wide study.

Since 1995, Weller and Ewing have won \$1,340,000 to fund the federal portion of the Corps' reconnaissance and feasibility studies of the Kankakee River.