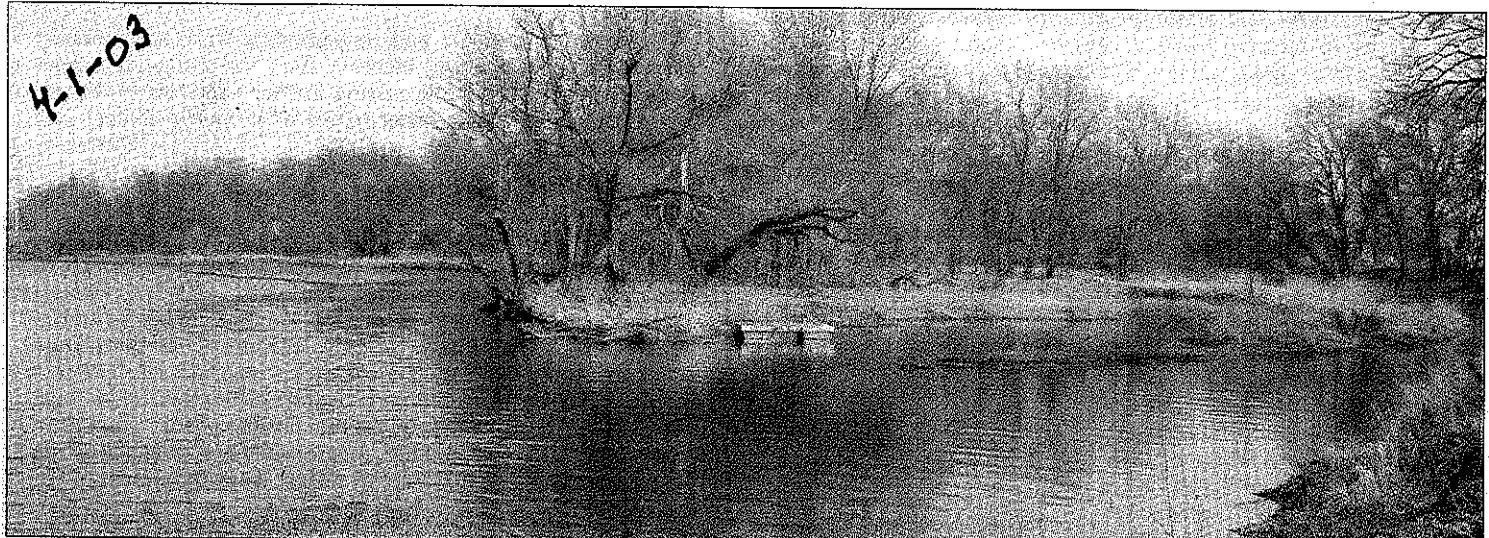


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Journal/Bill Byrns

AT AROMA PARK the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is looking at an area near Riggs Grove where rapid sediment build-up is under way just downstream from the Aroma Park Bridge. The Corps plans to use a computer model to determine how to avoid further deterioration of the channel, at right in the photo above.

Corps: Localize river work

Scope of sediment problem doomed basinwide project

By Bill Byrns

Journal writer

The sheer scale of sedimentation in the Kankakee River is ultimately what buried the latest Army Corps of Engineers study.

While a basin-wide solution has proven "not to be economically feasible," Corps officials say there is a lot that can be accomplished by small scale, localized projects.

And they promise that the river data collected over the past three years will help streamline future work.

But, they also add that it will take a wider coalition of local partners to entice future action by the Corps.

"There's a misconception that we are saying 'here's the study and good-bye' — that's not the case," says Debbie Militello, an aide to U.S. Rep. Jerry Weller.

"What we see as feasible is the need for more players, particularly agriculture. If we don't have the NRCS (Natural Resources and Conservation Service) at the table, then it's going to be difficult to take it to the next level."

Jenni Smith, Corps' project manager for the Kankakee River Basin Study, outlined some of the recommendations that will be detailed in the final report. Those recommendations will include management practices by regions that can help reduce sediments entering the river.

Jodi Staebell with the Corps' Rock Island District, added that two local projects are still in the works under the umbrella of the Illinois Rivers 2020 program.

The Corps is looking at erosion problems on

Sugar Creek near Milford, a large Iroquois River tributary, and has began modeling work at Aroma Park, where a side channel downstream from the bridge along the south bank is filling in with sand.

Staebell says work on Iroquois County's problems is farther along than the Aroma project right. The Corps has also began looking at logjams in the Iroquois River between Watseka and the state line.

"As we get funding in our next fiscal year, more effort will go into the Kankakee River project."

Staebell says the Corps has already done some computer modeling for the Aroma area. "Next we have to add structures to the model to see how the sand changes and how it will affect the other side of the river."

And while the Corps has looked at sand removal projects, the consensus is that keeping the sediments from reaching the river will be the most economical.

A recent test on the Kankakee, east of Momence, successfully removed some sand near the state line, but "we discovered that it only affected a one-to-three mile section downstream," explained project manager Steve Russell.

In that case, Russell said, the cost clearly outweighed the limited benefit. Russell agrees with Smith that sediment controls can be successfully incorporated into small scale aquatic ecosystem restoration projects that will produce localized benefits.

"The (sediment) problems that you have all been bumping your heads against are so difficult that you will never get your arms around it," Russell said. "That is where I think the

Chicago study did us all some good by looking at the big picture. It forces us to ask, 'what is the desired future condition, and is it achievable?'

J.R. Black, chairman of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership, criticized the Corps for its focus on suspended sediments rather than on the heavier sand bedload. "The problem is a lot of the sediment you count flushes right through the system. Its the heavier sediment coming out of Indiana that doesn't get counted."

Black warns that the build-up of sand could be disastrous. "If we have a flood like we did in the 1950s, we're going to lose lives."

"The benefits are life and death for some of us," agreed John Conklin of Momence. He compared the Corps' inaction as being "like the traffic light that doesn't get put up until enough people are killed."

"This river is almost gone," Conklin added pointing upstream from the Anchor Club east of Momence. "In the 15 years that I've lived here, I've seen rapid deterioration."

Russell added an ominous note about the river's future. "The system is filling up and slowing down. The energy (of the river) is slowing down" he says because of sedimentation.

"We are not running away from your problem," said Roy Dada of the Corps' Chicago office. "We are still willing to help. We can use this data and proceed on from there when local projects are organized."

Corps officials promised that their report, due out in August or September, will include site specific recommendations and cost estimates for some projects.