

Hope for Kankakee River flows with Army Corps study

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The Kankakee River is cleaner than most, but sand and sediment are choking the waterway, leading to worsening floods and disappearing fish.

Now, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is going to study some possible solutions, to applause from a partnership of local business, government and conservation interests.

The causes of the problem are so complex and long-standing that they defy any quick fix, but the

river's supporters are heartened.

"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 Kankakee originates in Indiana and meanders for about 60 miles in Illinois before it joins the Des Plaines River near Chanahon, 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 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 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 small-mouth 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 Momence 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 (R-Ill.), Tom Ewing (R-Ill.) and Steve Buyer (R-Ind.) recently secured \$450,000 in federal and state money to pay for the Army Corps study.