



North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Southeast Region
November, 2004

"Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties of the earth are never alone or weary in life. . . . Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts."
(from *Sense of Wonder*) – Rachel Carson

Letter from the Regional Director

As work progresses on meeting the goals of the North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area, I marvel at our current accomplishments. This unique project is precedent setting in its specific objective of preserving the strong agricultural farming tradition of the project area while maintaining wildlife habitat, restoring plant communities and wetlands, and providing recreational opportunities. These objectives will be accomplished through many partners.

The Milwaukee River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands have high ecological diversity, as well as opportunities for further protection and recreation.

Diversity of the Milwaukee River Basin

The North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area is a 19,487-acre project within the diverse Milwaukee River Basin. The basin encompasses portions of seven counties, 13 cities, 32 towns, and 24 villages, and is divided into six watersheds -- Milwaukee River North, Milwaukee River East-West, Milwaukee River South, Cedar Creek, Menomonee River and Kinnickinnic River. More than 1.0 million people call the basin their home, with 900,000 people residing in the southernmost quarter.

The commitment to protecting the unique resources in and farming heritage of this area – as shown by the farming community, citizens, conservation organizations, and local, state and national governments – led to the project's approval before the Natural Resources Board in August 2002. Governor McCallum approved the project in September of 2002.

Thank you for your participation in this project. My staff and I value your continued involvement, ideas and enthusiasm as the project evolves.

Gloria McCutcheon, Director
Southeast Region

Collectively, these watersheds contain about 500 miles of perennial streams, over 400 miles of intermittent streams, 35 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline, 57 named lakes, and numerous small lakes and ponds. Wetlands encompass over 68,000 acres, or 12 percent of the basin land area.

The Natural Heritage Inventory (WDNR, 2000) has documented 16 endangered, 26 threatened and 65 special concern plant and animal species, and 30 rare aquatic and terrestrial communities within the basin.

The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) identified over 18,000 acres of high quality natural communities and critical species habitats remaining in the basin (SEWRPC,

Public Voices Heard

The 19,487-acre Milwaukee River North Branch Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area was established after a thorough and thoughtful public involvement process. Over a three-year period, Department staff developed a public participation plan, met with local, county and state elected officials, held two series of public forums, formed a Citizen Advisory Committee, and met with the Land Conservation Committees and Wisconsin Farm Bureau representatives of Sheboygan, Ozaukee and Washington counties.

Additionally, staff developed two newsletters on the proposed project and made presentations at town board meetings. Department staff kept landowners and residents of the study area and beyond informed of the process through extensive mailings reaching

Citizen Advisory Committee

The CAC is a group comprised of local citizens and officials that represent the major interests, especially agriculture and natural resources, in the project and surrounding areas. Because a key purpose of the CAC is to advise the Department on agricultural lands, a greater percentage of the committee is comprised of active farmers.

The primary initial goal of the committee was to identify priorities and ways to protect lands in the project area. The CAC also serves as a liaison with the citizens of the area, and will help identify future public involvement needs.

Department staff asked farmers and representatives of farm organizations, local governments, and conservation organizations to serve on the CAC. The following people graciously accepted our invitation:

Representing agriculture are: Ken Albinger, Ozaukee County Farm Bureau and member of Milwaukee River

1997). About 18 percent of the land area of the basin is covered by urban uses, while the remainder is considered rural. Agriculture is still dominant in the northern half of the basin.

over 2,800 households. Staff also went door-to-door to meet with residents to discuss the proposal. Based on public feedback the boundary was adjusted after each series of public forums.

The Department is now working with the local Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) to guide the purchase, use and management of the farmlands and natural resources of the project area. (See article on the CAC below)

With continued partnering, the North Branch of the Milwaukee River, its tributaries, and surrounding lands will continue to provide great farming opportunities, recreation, and an improved way of life for many generations.

Basin Partner Group; Mike Becker, Washington County Farm Bureau; Brian Huiras, Town of Fredonia Plan Commission; Steve Jung, Town of Scott; Doug Kohlwey, Town of Scott and Sherman Farm Bureaus; Rose Leider, Ozaukee County Board and Land Conservation Committee; Bill Mueller, Town of Sherman Plan Commission; and Richard Mueller, Town of Fredonia; and Eric Rathke, Business Owner.

Other CAC members and the organization they represent are: Mike DeMaster Sheboygan County Zoning Department and Sheboygan County Conservation Association; Jim Dieringer, Town of Farmington; Jill Hewitt, City of Mequon Park Board, ad hoc committee for Mequon Nature Preserve; Andy Holschbach, Ozaukee County Land Conservation Department; Dan Lynch, Natural Resource Conservation Service; and Shawn Graff, The Ozaukee-Washington Land Trust.

Dan Wilson, University Extension Community Development Educator, serves as a facilitator for the meetings that are held at the Town of Farmington Hall near Boltonville.

The CAC ranked categories of land and other criteria for prioritizing land for protection within the project area. And they provided guidance on the type of land protection tools (for instance, easements or fee simple purchase) that would be preferred to use for different categories of land.

DNR Land Acquisition – Process & Priorities

The Department of Natural Resources acquires land several ways. Land can be donated or bequeathed to the Department for the purposes of preservation or rehabilitation, or it can be acquired through purchase. Land can be purchased outright (fee title), or certain rights to the land, like the right to develop it for residential use, can be purchased as an easement on the deed (often referred to as purchase of development rights).

Now that the North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area feasibility study has been approved, the Department of Natural Resources can purchase land or easements within the boundaries of the project.

Following the guidance outlined in the study and provided by the Citizen Advisory Committee, the Department has used the following generic

Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) Program – How do Wisconsin Landowners and Citizens Benefit?

When land is purchased for public use -- that is, for the preservation or creation of public spaces for recreation -- what is the economic burden to Wisconsin's citizens? Contrary to popular belief, the economic burden actually shifts away from the private citizen. It's true that land purchased by the Department is removed from the tax roll, but to compensate for the tax base loss, the state issues each taxing jurisdiction (town, village, city, school,

The Department appreciates the guidance developed by the CAC and will use this information to pursue opportunities to conserve land within the project area.

The CAC will meet occasionally to review the Department's application of the guidelines, and to provide further guidance on how to preserve the natural resources and farming heritage of this area.

priorities and tools for land protection as lands in the project area have been acquired:

- agricultural lands – easements
- riparian & wetlands, including lowland forests – fee title
- upland forests – easement or fee title

Of course, all acquisitions are on a voluntary basis from willing sellers. Each property is unique and the interests of the seller are considered. The Department's acquisition efforts usually focus on land protection efforts. We also purchase smaller agricultural fields that are part of a large ownership, or agricultural lands that have restoration potential or that provide access to adjacent conservation lands.

Landowners who have questions about land acquisitions can contact Dale Katsma, Project Manager, at (920) 892-8756, ext. 3040.

county, and special districts) an aid payment equivalent to property taxes.

It works this way: The Department purchases a parcel of land from a willing seller. The purchase price is set by an appraisal prepared in compliance with state and national guidelines, unless the seller chooses to make a gift.

In January of the year following the purchase, the seller pays a prorated property tax that is based on the months he or she owned the parcel of land, and the Department pays the balance.

In January of each subsequent year the Department makes an aid payment that is equivalent to or greater than the amount of property tax that would be due if the land were still privately owned. The process that the Department goes through annually ensures that

Contacts and Helpful Links

If you have any questions about the North Branch Milwaukee River Wildlife and Farming Heritage Area, or if you would like a copy of the feasibility study, please feel free to contact Dale Katsma, Wildlife Biologist, 1155 Pilgrim Road, Plymouth, WI 53073, 920-892-8756 ext. 3040 or at dale.katsma@dnr.state.wi.us.

Dale is available to assist with land management, wildlife management, and land acquisition questions you might have about this new project area.

we pay a fair share of aid on all land purchased. There is no loss of property tax revenue in the taxation district due to Department ownership of land.

Wisconsin citizens benefit from a reduced tax burden in their home districts and from improved access to the beauty and wonders of the state's natural resources.

You might also find the following web sites of interest:

Feasibility Study Web Page

- www.dnr.wi.gov/org/gmu/milw/nbranch.htm

Milwaukee River Basin Web Sites

- www.dnr.wi.gov/org/gmu/milw/index.htm
- www.clean-water.uwex.edu/milwaukee



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