

Flood Relief for Southwest Indiana Landowners

Kris Vance, USDA-NRCS



Abandoning farming operations in the floodplain and entering lands into NRCS' Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) is paying dividends for local landowners living within the confines of the Wabash River Watershed. WREP is a voluntary program offered by NRCS to help landowners protect, restore, enhance and manage high priority wetlands and optimize wildlife habitat. In 2003 and 2004, the Wabash River swelled out of its banks causing some of the worst flooding in recorded history. Landowners that utilized Phase One of this wetland program have been able to replace lost income and allow nearly 2,000

acres to be restored back to natural conditions, providing much needed habitat for the treasure chest of rare and endangered species that call this area home. Phase Two of this program is currently in progress and is promising another 1,145 acres of wetlands enrolled in the WREP program.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

Six years ago The Nature Conservancy saw an opportunity to assist local landowners in a large-scale floodplain restoration project. In partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the two organizations launched a program that was aimed at connecting 78 existing WRP sites to protect a 60 mile stretch along the Wabash River. This area, once flood prone and erosive, now has approximately 50-80% of the floodplain protected with restored forest and wetlands and is a thriving breeding and resting area for waterfowl and migratory birds. This stretch of river also allows for much needed flood storage, improvement in water quality for downstream users and the mitigation of nutrients prior to reaching the Gulf of Mexico.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

In recent years, there has been extensive flood damage to farmland along the Wabash River. Many of the fields along the river are flooded repeatedly, causing enough damage to affect crop production. Indiana's first WREP program along the Wabash River has produced, collectively, more than 4 million dollars to Indiana landowners in Fountain, Parke, Sullivan, Vigo, Vermillion and Warren Counties. Phase Two of the program has brought in approximately 1.8 million dollars and incorporated three new counties, including Knox, Gibson and Posey.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The loss of vegetation has had an impact on the amount of scour erosion in the floodplain and loss of habitat to many rare and endangered species. To address this issue, the project evaluated and recommended improvements to existing strategies for reforestation within the Wabash River floodplain. Hardwood species are being re-introduced to the area and include Buttonbush, Pecan, Bald Cypress, Bur Oak, and Overcup Oak. The inclusion of hardwood trees and additional grass, sedge and forbs species are critical for the lifecycle of many globally significant aquatic and land species associated with the Wabash floodplain and river bluffs that line the valley.

