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### Jurisdiction

Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program objectives focus on improvement of quality of life achieved through natural resources conservation and community development. The Potawatomi RC&D includes Kalamazoo, Calhoun, St. Joseph, Branch, and Hillsdale Counties in Michigan. The coordinator is geographically based in the Calhoun County area. This interview covered RC&D regional issues with a particular focus on Calhoun County. The RC&D program addresses issues such as farm preservation, urban sprawl, water quality, wetland preservation, and natural resource fragmentation. Major tributaries of the St. Joseph River in Calhoun County include the main branch of the St. Joseph River, Tekonsha Creek, Nottawa Creek, and Pine Creek. Villages in the St. Joseph River Watershed include Athens, Burlington, Tekonsha, Union City, and Homer.

### Projects/beneficial watershed features

A Watershed Management Plan was developed for the Nottawa Creek Watershed under a 1996 Section 319 planning grant. The plan was completed in 1998 and provides a framework and goals to address sedimentation and nitrates in groundwater. Recommendations of the plan are in various stages of implementation. Critical target areas identified by the plan are impacted by: 1) unrestricted livestock access to waterways; 2) stream bank erosion and soil erosion from drain maintenance activities; 3) soil erosion from agricultural land; 4) soil erosion from road/stream crossings; and 5) soil erosion from drainage of wetlands. Watershed features, critical habitat, and critical groundwater protection areas are also identified in the plan. A recent Clean Michigan Initiative Grant was received to implement further recommendations of the Nottawa Creek Watershed Management Plan under the guidance of Tracey Bronson, of the Calhoun Conservation District. Ongoing improvements are expected to generally improve conditions in Nottawa Lake, which experiences seasonal problems with sedimentation and phosphorus.

The Nottawaseppi Band of the Potawatomi Indians received a \$250,000 U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grant in January 2004. The 120-acre Nottawaseppi Reservation is located near Athens, which is in the Pine Creek Watershed. The grant will address conservation practices that benefit wildlife and improve habitat in the Pine Creek area.

A previous Section 319 project around Homer Lake addressed problems associated with sedimentation and pollution from directly connected storm drains. Solutions included the use of wetlands for filtration of runoff. Blain VanSickle, Calhoun County Drain Commissioner, was involved in this effort.

### Challenges in the watershed

The City of Coldwater is not in Calhoun County, but because of the regional nature of the interview, it was discussed as a potential area for improvement. Two chains of lakes exist near the city. The north chain was subject to a recent investigation resulting in the quantification of sediment and phosphorus inputs (including those from a local wastewater treatment plant) in order to determine strategies to reduce water quality problems. The middle chain of lakes could

also benefit from such a study. A high growth rate, industrial development, highly variable seasonal tourist populations, septic systems, farm runoff, and a dense goose population make the middle chain of lakes vulnerable to water quality problems.

The St. Joseph River would benefit greatly from a general push to preserve and protect headwater areas. A demonstration project that would involve the promotion of responsible builders that practice conservation minded design and construction practices was suggested.

#### Additional needs/concerns

A number of general observations were discussed during the interview. First, it was noted that the current implementation funding priority of the Section 319 program is targeted for watersheds with water quality problems (typically defined by one pollutant of concern, such as phosphorus) severe enough to warrant inclusion on the TMDL [303 (d)] list. Implementing solutions on water bodies with existing problems reduces the likelihood that funding will be awarded for protection of high quality areas to prevent future degradation of high quality waters. In essence, it will be up to non-regulatory groups to develop and fund protection programs by other methods.

Secondly, the importance of preservation and conservation in headwater areas of subwatersheds was stressed. It is likely that in the long term, riparian corridors, particularly those in headwater areas, will be the most desirable and likely locations for greenways. Planning is critical to address a balance between habitat diversity and community needs (i.e., corridors that link habitat patches and linear park systems for recreation). A national housing survey published in 1994 was cited as an example of what stakeholders value in communities. The top choices were education, safety, and protected, connected open space. Protection of headwater areas, and riparian corridors in general, provides that accessible open space while reducing the land consumption typically resulting from sprawl.

Thirdly, general watershed management strategies were reviewed and included four approaches. Using approach number one, problem areas are identified and federal program grants are used to address conservation practices. Using approach number two, the education of stakeholders empowers individuals to personally participate in making improvements.

Using approach number three, long range land-use plans are developed in counties and townships and typically consist of the following steps: 1) natural resource inventories are conducted and published by local agencies and governments; 2) master plans are reviewed in light of the resources of the land area; 3) a build-out analysis that demonstrates how outdated or non-existent polices usually allow rampant unconstrained development of most land without regard for preservation; and 4) revision of township and/or county master plans allows for a balance between growth and preservation of local resources. Once master land/use plans are in place and recognized, existing federal cost share programs may be available to local governments to implement protection programs. In Michigan, Act 262 would function in a similar manner, and is expected to receive funding appropriations in the near future. Approximately thirteen counties in Michigan have finalized such plans and are therefore eligible for funding. Calhoun is the only county in the watershed to have done so to date. Other counties are progressing toward that goal, including St. Joseph, Branch, Kalamazoo, and Van Buren.

Using approach number four, large scale demonstration projects serve as living, visible examples of how improvements or plans result in water quality and quality of life improvements. Demonstration projects usually result from, or are critical to, the other approaches.

Michigan is ranked high in terms of funds available for the protection of farmland. However, unlike a growing number of states, particularly in the east, Michigan does not have funds set aside for open space preservation. Thus, it is up to locally led initiatives to undertake open space management efforts and develop funding strategies.

Michigan drain commissioners have the authority to regulate 75 feet to either side of the center of county drains. In that sense, conservation land use planning is available, but technically limited to this space. Involvement between commissioners and land owners varies greatly, and the extent of cooperation is highly dependent on the individual working relationships. In addition, commissioners that attempt to regulate the land outside the drains sometimes encounter political backlash from constituents and township officials. In comparison, the State of Indiana is thought to have a political system in which the county surveyors are able to have a greater impact, due to rules and general power of the county, to suggest and enforce land management practices that negatively affect public drains.

The size and scope of the St. Joseph River Watershed make the development of a management plan an arduous task. It was suggested that the planning team might consider applying for an additional grant if studies are to be undertaken that attempt to rank, rate, or quantify possible implementation projects. It was also suggested that the basin would greatly benefit from the establishment of a permanent basin council to complement or incorporate the existing St. Joseph River Basin Commission. The size of the watershed could justify the creation of a more long term funding mechanism to keep a designated watershed coordinator in place to facilitate multi-county and multi-state relationships, technology transfer, education, and continued improvement.