

New Watershed Program Incentivizes Soil Savings in Saginaw Bay Headwaters

What if a conservation program could offer farmers financial rewards for every single bit of soil they saved, instead of set flat rates? The Gratiot Conservation District (GCD) hopes the answer would be more conservation adopted on high risk fields and less sediment delivered to streams. For the next three years GCD has the chance to put this theory to the test in the Upper Bad River Watershed thanks to a Sediment Reduction Grant from the Great Lakes Commission (GLC).

The grant project is aimed at reducing sediment delivery to streams in the Upper Bad River Watershed, a tributary to the Shiawassee River in a headwaters region of the Saginaw Bay Watershed. This "pay-for-performance" approach to soil conservation is the first program of its kind in the Saginaw Bay Watershed. It is made possible through the use of a new online watershed management tool called the *Great Lakes Watershed Management System* developed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in partnership with Purdue University and the MSU-Institute of Water Research. The tool assesses how much sediment can be saved from streams by applying different Best Management Practice (BMP) scenarios to fields. This allows GCD to reward payments to participants based on their actual sediment reduction performance when they adopt new BMPs. GCD hopes this type of approach will make more "cents" for a farm's bottom line: the more sediment kept out of streams, the greater the payout.

The GLC grant provides \$118,000 for contract payments to Gratiot County landowners and farmers within the Bad River Watershed over the next three years. Participants will be compensated at a rate of \$78.25 for every ton of sediment they reduce. The goal is that these incentive dollars will translate into a 7,900 ton sediment load reduction to the Saginaw Bay Watershed.

The Upper Bad River Watershed was selected for this pilot project because of its excessive sediment and nutrient load contributions to the Shiawassee River. Past Department of Natural Resources and TNC surveys of the Bad River have indicated poor water quality caused by sediment and a fish community of very low health.

The BMPs encouraged through the sediment reduction project are non-permanent, vegetative and residue management practices including cover crops, filter strips, grassed water ways, hayland plantings and reduced tillage practices. GCD hopes the program will find traction with those producers "on the fence" about conservation BMPs because the contracts are short term and the vegetative practices can be harvested for livestock or sold for income.

The Saginaw Bay Watershed is the largest watershed in Michigan. Its overall land use is 45% agricultural, while the land use within the Bad River Watershed is 86.5% agricultural. For more information on the Upper Bad River Watershed Sediment Reduction Project contact GCD at (989) 875-3900 extension 180 or email GCD Watershed Technician Ben Wickerham at ben.wickerham@gmail.com. To get updates on the success of the Saginaw Bay Watershed project, please visit <http://gratiot-conservation-district.blogspot.com/p/sedimentation-reduction-project-in-bad.html>

