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Delaware Watershed Tour Showcases Practices to Improve Water Quality

By Connie Pantle

Whiting, Ks.—Heavy rain may have altered a recent tour of the Delaware River watershed, however the relevance of implementing practices to protect water quality was front and center throughout the day. Two days before the tour, a portion of the upper watershed received five to seven inches of rain, causing the Delaware River to rise and even flood in some areas. Funded by a grant to the Jackson County Conservation District by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the tour was part of efforts to inform the public about management practices being implemented to protect water quality and reduce sedimentation into Perry Reservoir.

One tour stop in particular illustrated the power of high flood waters: David Royer's streambank stabilization project along the Delaware River in Atchison County. This project was the largest of three projects that Royer completed along the river this summer. Overall, there were 14 rock vanes designed on the three sites, totaling 2,713 feet. The rock vanes detour the main force of the river current away from the easily erodible bank and into the middle of the river. Willow trees, shrubs and grasses were also planted along the bank of the river to hold the soil.

Royer said he was motivated to stabilize the stream bank because he was tired of rebuilding the levee that protects his adjacent crop ground. He also recognized how much of the bank was sloughing off into the river each year.

"Every landowner we are working with on these projects reports losing several feet of bank nearly every year—that's extremely valuable farm land that is washing away, now resting in the bottom of Perry Reservoir," Marlene Bosworth, Coordinator of the Delaware River Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS), said.

According to Bosworth, the Delaware WRAPS received funding for Phase I of a large streambank restoration project on the Delaware River through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to fund seven projects on the river. The State Conservation Commission (SCC), the Kansas Water Office (KWO) and landowners also provided funding for the projects. Phase II of the project will involve construction of eight additional river sites in Atchison and Jefferson Counties. Funding for these sites will come from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, SCC, KWO and landowners, Bosworth said.

Bosworth said "recent studies indicate that a large portion of the sediment that is filling in Perry Lake is coming from streambank sources. In order to prolong the life of the lake, an important water resource for the entire Northeast Kansas region, we have to slow down this sediment source," she said.

Another stop that illustrated the power of floodwaters was at the Jackson County farm of Alta Behrnes and her son Gary. While the stream waters were high, the banks were protected by a grass buffer strip that the Behrnes family planted along a tributary to the Delaware River. The buffer strip is a CP21 practice, which is part of the USDA Continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) through the Jackson County Conservation District.

"If we're really concerned about our land, buffer strips will sure help reduce erosion and filter what goes into the creek," Melvin Steinlage, former Buffer Coordinator for Nemaha County said.

The next stop on the tour illustrated an innovative livestock program and diverse crop rotation system. David Hallauer with the Meadowlark Extension District explained how Jefferson County farmer Daryl Sales utilizes a variety of forages in his cow-calf operation. Hallauer said Sales uses a “diverse and flexible grazing program” with such forages as Eastern gammagrass, clover, alfalfa, and native grass. He said the operation includes a variety of warm and cool season grasses and they “use it when it is best”.

As the tour bus crossed Perry Lake Reservoir on Highway 92, Bunnie Watkins with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers explained the purposes of Perry Lake Reservoir and their order of importance to the Corps. The intended purposes are: flood control; recreation; fish and wildlife management; water supply, and water quality. Maintaining a level of water for navigation in the rivers downstream is also an intended purpose for the lake, she said. Marvin Boyer, Lake Quality Program Coordinator for the Corps, said the natural succession for a body of water is to silt in, therefore it is important to “get the most out of the authorized purposes for the lake.”

A stop at the Danny and Deb Barrows farm in Jackson County highlighted a newly installed alternative livestock watering site, one of several the couple has installed for their 400 pairs of cows and calves. Danny said they rehabilitated an old pond instead of building a new one. The old pond—once surrounded by crop fields—had silted in over the decades. He said they breached the original pond’s dam two years ago and let the silt dry. That silt now forms an island in the pond and the couple plans to plant willows and cypress trees there to form a wildlife habitat. Additionally, plans call for fencing the pond to exclude the cow herd.

To control algae in his watering tanks, Danny utilizes minnows. He said he places cinder blocks in the tanks to provide habitat for the tiny fish and they eat the algae.

Additional rain fell on the tour during the final stop at the Jackson County farm of Fred and Nancy Coombs. The couple is working to restore the prairies and forests on the farm, which has been the Fred’s family since 1857. Working with Dave Bruton, District Forester with the Kansas Forest Service, the Coombs are implementing Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) practices such as thinning and pruning.

The Coombs working to eliminate invasive species and plant desirable trees such as black walnut, burr oak, shellbark hickory and pawpaw. They are also planting native plants, forbs and wildflowers to improve the native pastures.

Tour sponsors were: Jackson County Conservation District; Delaware River WRAPS; Glacial Hills Resource Conservation & Development Region, Inc.; Jackson County Board of Commissioners; Jefferson County Conservation District; Kansas Forest Service; Kansas Rural Center; Meadowlark Extension District; NRCS; State Conservation Commission; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Wildhorse Riverworks, Inc.