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NEWS RELEASE

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ASSESSMENTS SERVE VITAL ROLE IN WRAPS PROCESS

By Connie Pantle, Kansas Rural Center

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Lawrence, Kansas—What is a watershed assessment and why does a Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS) area need one? That question was recently answered by a number of presenters at the Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy (WRAPS) Regional Watershed Seminar on May 22 in Lawrence.

“Watershed assessment can take many forms—but generally is performed to characterize watershed conditions; identify needs and opportunities; target resources to address problem areas or protect high quality areas, and evaluate how land management may be affecting water quality and watershed ecology,” said Jeff Neel, Blue Earth LLC, and consultant to Kansas Alliance of Wetlands and Streams (KAWS).

Neel, who is conducting assessments for several WRAPS, said he likes to think of an assessment “as a holistic evaluation of how the integrated watershed system is—or is not—working to create the stream and river conditions in any given watershed.”

WRAPS is a process adopted by the state that involves local people, organizations, and state and federal agencies in a unified effort to identify and work on water issues that affect the watershed. Watershed assessment is the second phase of the four-phased process of planning, assessment, development, and implementation. During the assessment phase, a WRAPS group must “review watershed conditions, trends, develop expectations of the watershed and management measures in use, identify restoration and protection needs and create a watershed model,” according to the website at www.kswraps.org.

John Bond, Northeast Chapter Coordinator for KAWS and one of the sponsors of the seminar, said WRAPS allows “stakeholders the opportunity to come together on a watershed scale.” “The WRAPS process pulls people together to work on a planning document, identify the goals of the watershed and what they need to accomplish to get there,” he said.

According to Neel, stakeholders living in the watershed provide an important perspective on the assessment. “They are extremely important for bringing their historical and current knowledge of the land and rivers to the planning table—who better knows the land than the guy or lady living on it and experiencing it daily?”

“The legacy of land use effects on river conditions is out there in the minds of people who work the land. They can help to bring the maps to life, and help to improve their content, and provide another check on the information they provide,” he said.

Travis Robb, See-Kan Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D), evaluated the Verdigris River (from Toronto to Coffeyville) in southeast Kansas. Comparing 1966 aerial photographs to 2006 aeriels was one of the first steps in Travis Robb’s assessment of the river. Robb explained how he used aeriels initially for a primary assessment of the watershed. However, he stressed the importance of walking the land to confirm or dispel your conclusions from the aeriels.

Neel agreed with Robb, saying “geographical information systems (GIS) and maps are but one tool in the toolkit and are no substitute for getting out there and seeing what is on the ground and in the water.”

“I don’t think we can get a good feel for a watershed without actually walking the land or wading a river, but maps do have their place around the table during the planning and assessment process and can be scaled to take a look at a watershed from different perspectives,” he said.

Dan Zerr, with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), said that the modeling program Spreadsheet Tool for Estimating Pollutant Load (StepL) uses modeling to piece together the information provided by the WRAPS stakeholder leadership teams. “From all the information you’ve given us—here are the models, the scenarios,” he said.

He added that a modeling component, such as StepL, is required for a WRAPS to complete its requirements to Environmental Protection Agency. “According to EPA, a WRAPS project must have a modeling component as it is a valuable tool to assess what is going on in your watershed,” he said.

Neel feels that the assessment phase carries over into other phases of the WRAPS process, such as the planning and implementation phases of WRAPS. “Initial assessment gives you information about current conditions and helps you to understand the extent of the problems and, perhaps, where you may be able to target limited resources for implementation efforts,” he said.

Neel said that the benefits of having an assessment completed give the WRAPS stakeholder leadership teams (SLT) a better idea of what the conditions of their watershed are. “It is important to develop support in the watershed community for the plan, so that the majority are committed to action that will lead to water quality improvements and better stream functioning when the time comes.”

Following the assessment, the next step is then to adopt practices to protect stream and river conditions. “I think the next step after initial assessment is to begin to create an awareness in the watershed of what the problems are or may be and try to get buy-in from stakeholders about what actions are needed to address the problems,” Neel said.

According to Neel “mimicking nature through our planning and implementation efforts” is one way to address the changes in the watershed’s hydrograph. While he understands that foregoing food and fiber production on the most productive land is not an option due to its impact to rural livelihoods, Neel said it is important to address “non-point source problems and achieve proper functioning streams and rivers with good water quality in Kansas watersheds.”

"We need to implement conservation practices throughout the landscape that help us to better mimic native conditions and strategically place our buffering, infiltration and filtering capacity in places where it can do the most good," he said.

"If coupled with good agricultural policy and smart conservation programs that support rural livelihoods and high quality of life, we could have the makings for quite the watershed community."

KAWS I-70 Chapter and the Kansas Association for Conservation & Environmental Education (KACEE) recently sponsored the seminar to answer questions about assessments. A number of presenters, including Neel, Robb, and Zerr addressed assessments and modeling at the seminar. Additional presenters included Phil Balch, The Watershed Institute; Tom Jacobs, Mid-America Regional Council; Kyle Mankin, Kansas State University, and Dave Sobelle, US Army Corps of Engineers.

In addition to StepL, other assessments covered at the seminar included Watershed Assessment of River Stability & Sediment Supply (WARSSS); Bank Erodibility Hazard Index (BE-HI); Trophic Assessment Screening Tool for Reservoirs (TASTR); WRAPS Adaptive Modeling as well as aerial interpretation and urban assessments.

More information about watershed assessment tools can be found on the EPA's website at <http://www.epa.gov/owow/watershed/tools/> and the WRAPS website at <http://www.kswraps.org/technical>

The Kansas Rural Center is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that promotes the long-term health of the land and its people through research, education and advocacy. KRC is a service provider for WRAPS throughout the state of Kansas.