
The Illinois River: Federal Focus & Vision Remarks

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Introduction

Thank you for inviting NRCS here again.

It is impressive to see so many partners here. I am impressed with the work of both Bob Frazee and Kim St John, your co-chairs for the conference.

With all the recent tragedies associated with Hurricane Katrina, I must say that EWP is on the mind of NRCSers everywhere. Illinois has already sent 25 employees with experience in flooding and disasters down to the State Conservationist in Louisiana.

It is clear that there is local, state and federal support of the Illinois River Watershed. This Watershed is a large portion of our state. It touches more than HALF of the counties in Illinois.

The Illinois River handles a large portion of the water that FLOWS THROUGH this state.

The NRCS Perspective

My agency, NRCS, has been involved with improvements to this basin for decades.

What is the focus and vision of the NRCS for the Illinois River? Our overall focus is implementing the Integrated Management Plan for the IL River Watershed.

Our role? To Provide good, sound conservation planning: At the subwatershed level, through watershed planning groups, to individual conservation plans.

Farm by farm. Parcel by parcel. Helping landowners conserve the land. We help them farm better and wiser. We help them protect their soil resources. We help them improve water quality. We help keep their operation sustainable—protecting resources and maintaining productivity. And we reward them for doing the right thing.

The land within the Illinois River Basin is highly productive land. We've got good soil in this state. Some of the best on the planet, frankly. These are WORKING LANDS. The challenge is to keep that land productive WHILE protecting it.

The Role of NRCS

Since 1935, our agency has worked to provide alternatives to private landowners about what land is best suited to farming, which areas are suited to trees, buffers, prairies, pasture and grazing land, wetlands, special areas for wildlife, and of course, crops. All these land uses are here in the Illinois River Watershed. And all are working to fulfill their part of a balanced ecosystem.

NRCS staff help private landowners make wise land use decisions. Many of those folks are here at the conference and are sitting right in this room. We work with landowners to develop plans and then we help them put those plans into action.

NRCS' Focus and Evidence of Commitment

To assist private landowners in implementing their plans, we have a portfolio of conservation programs. NRCS programs like WRP, EQIP, and WHIP put great projects on the map.

Everyone here knows the success programs like this can create— Spunky Bottoms, Spring Lake, Kelly Lake, Emiquon. I know that these wonderful success stories would not be possible without NRCS programs and technical assistance.

Within the Illinois River Watershed, NRCS has:

- Funneled more than \$23 million since 1996 through the WRP for wetlands on more than 16,000 acres. With WRP, the conservation commitment lasts FOREVER on many of these acres.
- Provided technical assistance that put conservation on 383,000 acres through CRP and CREP.
- Delivered about \$20 million in financial assistance through EQIP to install conservation practices on 433,000 acres.
- Provided \$822,000 for more than 200 WHIP contracts—Thousands of acres of wildlife habitat improvements.
- Given \$2.1 million for easements on grassland and pasture conservation--GRP.
- For the Emiquon Project—one of the largest in the nation—NRCS will pay nearly \$11 million to purchase a conservation easement on 6,400 acres that The Nature Conservancy wants to restore to critical wetlands.
- For Spring Lake, NRCS provided \$612,000 and technical assistance for this 400 acre wetland project.
- For Spunky Bottoms, NRCS' WRP paid nearly \$880,000 for this restoration on nearly 1,000 acres in Brown County.
- The Spoon River Streambank Protection Project is another tremendous opportunity. For this, we will work hand-in-hand with IDNR, IDA, and IEPA to make this project happen.

NRCS is here for projects within the Illinois River. We are here with our programs. We are here with our people. We are here with our dollars to make things happen. We are here to help.

These projects would not BE projects without NRCS programs and financial assistance combined with the strong stewardship beliefs of Illinois' private landowners.

All these projects involve many partners as well. It takes all of us working together—NRCS, IDNR, the Corps, and all the other other state, federal, and non profit partners gathered here today who help us accomplish our mutual goals and see our vision through.

The newest NRCS program, the Conservation Security Program, is IN the Illinois River Watershed this year. Hundreds of landowners within the Upper Sangamon Watershed will be rewarded for their past and future conservation commitment.

NRCS has the programs, the technical specialists, and the expertise to continue to invest in the Illinois River. We are proud to be a federal partner in the past, in the present, and in the future successes of it.

Thank you.
