

Sprawl threatens river — and cropland

By Bill Byrns
Journal writer

"Urban sprawl is a principal threat to both agriculture and natural resources in the Kankakee River basin," says the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in outlining its proposal to build a 30,000-acre wildlife refuge.

A transformation of the landscape, from agriculture to residential, is looming. Building booms are under way at Manteno, Bourbonnais and Limestone townships in Kankakee, and in eastern Will County. Across the state line, Indiana's Newton, Jasper, Pulaski and Marshall counties are growing faster than the state average, according to a 1996 Indiana Farm Bureau report.

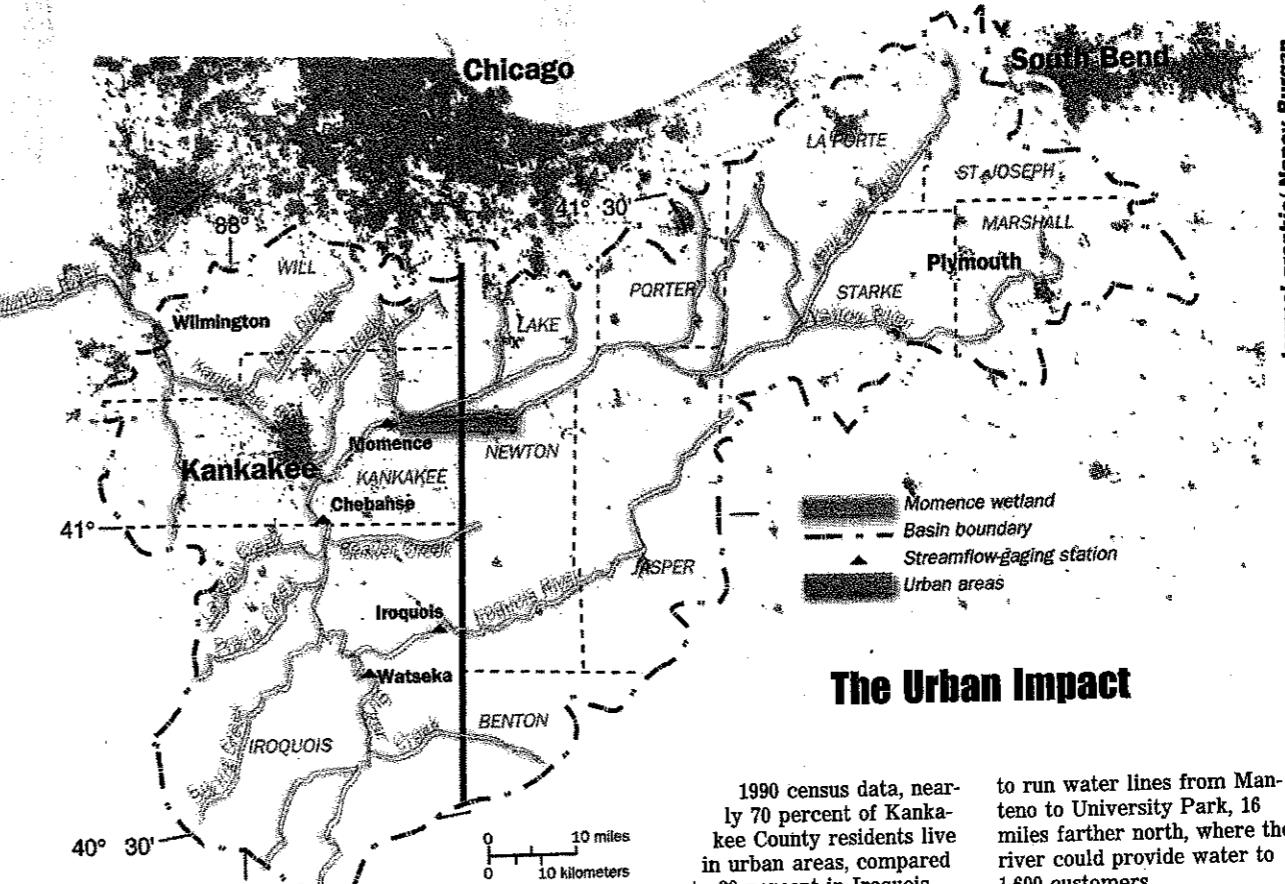
Even more population growth and urban development for the region is anticipated if a third Chicagoland airport is built as proposed in eastern Will County.

Over the past decade, Will County's population has grown by 34 percent up from 357,313 in 1990 to a U.S. Census-estimated 478,392 in mid-1999. Minorities contributed to the county's growth with the Hispanic population showing a dramatic 87 percent increase in the decade.

To a very large extent, the Kankakee River basin stands as a southern boundary to the expansion of the Chicagoland-Gary megalopolis. While the area still largely enjoys its rural and small town landscape, urban sprawl is coming, according to J. Dixon Esseks, professor of public administration at Northern Illinois University.

Homesites in the green belt, beyond the metropolitan area, are becoming more and more attractive.

One factor of this trend is that farmers on the fringe, facing rising taxes and production costs, are selling out for homesites and moving south to buy



The Urban Impact

1990 census data, nearly 70 percent of Kankakee County residents live in urban areas, compared to 20 percent in Iroquois County, next south. More than 50,000 live in Kankakee, Bradley and Bourbonnais, while only 5,400 live in Watska, Iroquois County's largest city.

That analysis was part of last year's University of Illinois seminar, "Farming on the Fringe."

Facing falling market returns and rising production costs and taxes, farmers on the fringe find selling out more attractive. "Tax swaps" are often used to trade development acres for much more farmland elsewhere, avoiding capital gains taxes.

Urban land has grown a modest 12.7 percent during the past decade in the Kankakee River area, according to an analysis by the state's Critical Trends Assessment Program. The report notes that, based on

Consumers Illinois Water Co. is eyeing a \$5.6 million project

to run water lines from Manteno to University Park, 16 miles farther north, where the river could provide water to 1,600 customers.

Joliet is also looking at building a 13-mile pipeline to withdraw water from the Kankakee at Wilmington. Joliet would then consider selling water to neighboring Channahon, Minooka, Shorewood and Plainfield.

Still unknown is the impact that proposed high speed rail routes may have on the area. Several of the proposed routes have raised concerns at Manteno about closing road crossings, and at Wilmington and Braidwood on the safety of 125 mph trains through town.

Even the river itself has become embroiled in the transportation crunch.

Periodic calls for a new

bridge between Kankakee's Court Street and Warner Bridge Road reflect the growing transportation need to link fast-growing Limestone Township with Bourbonnais, or for a western interstate bypass.

Plans to rebuild and reopen the State Line Bridge, east of Momence, have been delayed for years by objections by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The ancient steel truss bridge is the only river crossing in the 12 miles from Momence and U.S. 41 in Indiana.

Three counties share jurisdiction over the bridge: Kankakee County and Indiana's Lake and Newton counties. County officials have agreed to share costs, \$200,000 each for Kankakee and Lake and \$88,000 for Newton, with the rest of the \$1.3 million cost coming from the federal government.

But objections by Fish and Wildlife Service and more recently by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources have delayed federal matching funds for the project. The agencies are worried about wetland and habitat loss in the LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area, which extends east from State Line Road.

If built, the new three-span bridge would be four feet higher than the present structure and, at 240 feet, 20 feet longer.

Construction is expected to impact one acre of adjoining wetlands, with a nine acre wetland restoration offered as mitigation.

Jack Nelson, who lives close to the bridge and is president of Indiana's Kankakee River Basin Commission, says the concern for wetlands ignores a greater safety issue facing boaters and canoeists trying to navigate beneath the old bridge.