

ers of America helping a boy named Jason find a pair of needy children the Sears store located in the Northfield area. The tradition Square mall Tuesday. For more details season, and see Page A3.

State scientist paints bleak river sedimentation picture

By Bill Byrns 12-6-00
Journal writer

The Kankakee River is dying, according to the latest, most comprehensive study of sedimentation ever conducted.

Sediments — mostly sand — are filling in the Six Mile Pool between Kankakee and Aroma Park and the Momence Wetlands, says Nani G. Bhowmik, the principal scientist for the Illinois State Water Survey and the state's top expert on the Kankakee River.

"What we found was that Six Mile Pool and Momence Wetlands are losing their capacity," Bhowmik said Tuesday during an Army Corps of Engineers open house at the Civic Auditorium in Kankakee.

The decline seems small — less than 1 percent a year — but the trend amounts to a disturbing "15 to 16 percent over the past 19 years," Bhowmik explains. "It means the river is getting

shallower and narrower."

The sand build-up is affecting two vital, but dramatically different, sections of the river — the deep water boating area above the Kankakee dam and the shallow, serpentine floodplain lying east of Momence toward Indiana.

For many along the river, Bhowmik's revelation is something they have seen first-hand. Many can recount stories of the river filling in their favorite swimming and fishing holes.

But this latest report, expected to be published next year, comprises 134 cross sections of the river studied between 1966 and 1999.

Bhowmik's report comes as the Corps is undertaking a massive Illinois River sedimentation study that may include restoration work on the Kankakee.

The Kankakee is among 10 major tributaries adding heavy sediment loads to the Illinois. The See RIVER, next page

Kankakee River findings by the Illinois State Water Survey:

- Sedimentation is causing the river to lose capacity in the Momence Wetlands and Six Mile Pool.
- A single sandbar at the state line last year contained 8,550 cubic yards of sand — an amount equal to 280 semi-trailer truckloads.
- The Corps of Engineers calculates that between 130,000 and 150,000 cubic yards of sand are at the state line area — an amount equal to 8,500 semi-trucks.
- The Kankakee River annually discharges 872,000 tons of sediment into the Illinois River — an amount equal to 43,600 truckloads a year.
- The Kankakee's sediment discharge to the Illinois River "nearly equals that of the DesPlaines (287,000 tons), Mazon (42,000 tons) and Fox (553,000 tons) combined."
- The Spoon River contributes the most sediment per year to the Illinois at 2,729,000 tons.

River

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Kankakee alone discharges 872,000 tons of sediment annually. That amount, equivalent to 43,600 semi-trailer loads, nearly equals the sediment carried by the DesPlaines, Mazon and Fox rivers combined.

Solutions the Corps is considering for controlling sediments on the Illinois River and Peoria Lakes are also seen as answers to the Kankakee's sand bed load.

In-stream structures are now seen as ways to direct the river's flow and control where sedimentation occurs. "Rather than dredging, we can make the sand move with the force of the river," explains Jim Mick of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Several types of the man-made structures trigger island-building in the river that, in turn, dictates where sediments are deposited.

It's one plan under consideration by DNR and the Corps for removing a massive sandbar at the state line.

That sandbar is one of the reasons Bhowmik says the Momence Wetlands section of river is losing capacity.

"This sandbar is reforming every year or two. The one we found in 1999 and the one we studied in 1980 are completely different. The '99 one is larger," Bhowmik says, calculating its size at 8,550 cubic yards, an amount equal to 280 semi loads.

Because it dissipates and reforms at regular intervals — much like the workings of a Lava Lamp — the state line sandbar sends huge waves of sediment downstream toward Kankakee.

In fact, according to J. R. Black, chairman of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership, the Corps estimates the state line

area alone contains between 130,000 and 150,000 cubic yards of sand. That would equal a volume of 8,500 semi truckloads.

Evidence that the Corps' island-building scheme may work is also found in Bhowmik's study of the river between Momence and Aroma Park.

The area, containing some of the river's largest islands, has remained comparatively stable, he said.

"We found the sediment rate is slower there, a very slow rate. The section has sandbar islands but the bed of the river is mostly rock and it has a steeper slope. The flow rate is the same as the other two areas, but the velocity of the river is higher," Bhowmik explained.

The increased velocity causes the river to scour sand away, something that the Corps believes can also be accomplished with man-made devices.

"They will have to be designed so they don't cause additional flooding," Mick said adding that such structures are already in common use around the nation.

Mick says funding a feasibility study of such projects is expected next year with construction likely to begin within the next two years.

"We are in a much better position to do something now than we were in the 1980s," says Bhowmik, who has seen the Kankakee River decline over the past 30 years.

"Right now there are three major activities going on," he said, referring to the Corps' basin-wide study and aquatic ecosystem restoration project on the Kankakee and the Illinois River Basin study, which includes watershed restoration on major tributaries.

"We now have all this data to make decisions for the river. Action is being taken and things are moving forward."