



Journal/Janet Cremer

A STUDY OF FLOODING and sedimentation on the Kankakee River, shown here at Momence, will end soon because of the cost-benefit ratio of the plan, according to officials with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Corps pulls plug on river study

Engineers cite cost effectiveness of flood control plan

By Bill Byrns, Journal writer

After spending well over \$3 million studying flooding and sedimentation on the Kankakee River, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers says there is little or nothing for them to do.

In fact, according to Jenni Smith, the latest in a string of Kankakee River Feasibility project managers, the Corps will recommend wrapping up work when their report is issued some months from now.

"We are recommending closing out the feasibility study and wrapping it up," Smith said.

"Our work to date reveals that a basin-wide, large-scale flood control project would not be feasible."

The key here is cost-benefit ratio, Smith explains.

Localize flooding, that regularly hits portions of the river in Indiana and Illinois, apparently doesn't affect enough people, property or crops to make it a worthwhile federal project.

"Our study does show a large potential for ecosystem restoration work," Smith said, noting that creating water retention areas is virtually the only solution being offered by the Corps.

Controlled wetland areas, either along the main channel or tributaries, could provide water storage to reduce flooding downstream, she adds.

"These wetlands, in addition to creating new habitat for fish and wildlife, would help reduce the flow of sediment into the river and reduce

the need for dredging downstream."

Smith added that future dredging or levee work would not be cost beneficial.

"We've investigated numerous alternatives and compared them and all our alternatives show that we don't have a recommended plan. We simply don't have a magic flood control plan," Smith said.

"I'm really disappointed in the way all these river projects end up," said Don Lambert, a member of the Momence Conservancy District board, who listened to the Corps report last week in Indiana.

"No one is interested in the Kankakee River — all the interest is in the Illinois River — and we are going to have nothing to show for all this work."

"This project has been handed off so many times, then they have to get back up to speed, and then it's handed off again. That's what bothers me about the Corps," says J. R. Black, chairman of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership.

Members of the Indiana-Kankakee River Basin Commission were equally upset with the lack of flood control solutions in the long-awaited report.

"One farmer who has had 100 acres where the water was knee deep in the fields said, 'You're telling me that the cost doesn't justify preventing this?'" Lambert said.

Future Corps involvement in the river will likely be limited to small scale ecosystem or flood control projects that share costs with local partners.

One such project, a test of a wedge-shaped sand removal device at the State Line Bridge 15 months ago, was ultimately deemed ineffective by the engineers.

Reportedly that project, and an associated wetlands restoration, has now also been dropped by the Corps.

The Corps study, begun in August of 1996, was intended to review flooding, sedimentation and water quality issues across the 5,200-square mile basin in northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana.

Originally the plan included a reconnaissance stage to be followed by feasibility and eventual construction projects. Now it appears to be ending at feasibility.

Trying to give a positive spin to the Corps' retreat, Smith notes that "there is a lot of work that has been done that can be applied to future projects. We have developed hydrological models, GIS (Global Information Satellite) data bases and field data of existing conditions in the basin."

But those who remember when Ken Derickson arrived in 1996 to begin the reconnaissance study, might recall his strange request at a series of public meetings.

"What I need now is all the studies — local, state and federal — of the river that have been done."

Derickson, savvy about his own agency's bureaucracy, added, "It's almost impossible to find all the Corps studies in our office. It's easier to go out and ask locally about them."