

Feds bicker over river

By Bill Byrns, Journal writer

PORTAGE, Ind. — Federal finger-pointing, an art that is becoming a regular part of the quarterly Indiana Kankakee River Basin Commission meetings, continued Thursday.

It's all part of the simmering turf battle between the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers' feasibility study for the Kankakee River basin and the proposal by the U.S. Forest Service to carve out a 30,000 acre Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

Apparently everyone — from Washington officials to local Congressmen on both sides of the state line to local partners in Illinois — are telling the Corps and FWS it's time to sit down and work out some unified plan for the Kankakee River Basin.

"We're under a lot of pressure to work out a plan with FWS," Corps project manager Ken Derickson told KRBC. "We're ready to sit down and talk. We want to be able to develop a clear statement of specifically what our working relationship is with FWS," Derickson said.

"But they still haven't sat down to work with us," he adds. Not surprisingly, FWS takes the reverse slant on the issue. Just two weeks ago during a high level visit to Kankakee, FWS Regional Director Bill Hartwig said his agency viewed the Corps as a partner in its refuge plan.

That meeting, which did not include the Corps, clearly sent a message to Hartwig that Illinois was heavily invested in the Corp's feasibility study as well as its local Kankakee River Basin Partnership.

Derickson said the Corps study seeks to address multiple objectives: flood control, sedimentation, water quality and recreation. "Fish and wildlife is concerned solely about fish and wildlife," he quipped.

"You all need to keep the pressure up on federal officials over this refuge plan," Derickson said. "You know that groups like the Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Club are active out there."

Commission members challenged the Indiana Department of Natural Resources for its recent letter supporting the refuge proposal. "How can you (DNR) be supportive of the refuge and still be a partner in the Corps study?"

"I don't see that letter as a 'hard and fast' commitment," replied Ken Smith, assistant director of the Indiana DNR division of water. "The rea-

son why we get involved in partnerships like this is so that we can all work towards a solution."

"There's no question in my mind how DNR stands on this," snapped Bob Ax, a banker from Plymouth, Ind. "There needs to be some consensus here, there needs to be some compromise here," he said. "We all have to give a little." Ax said, "but I don't want to be the only one giving."

Derickson also reported that the eight-year-long Sumava Resorts study is continuing to look at cost cutting methods for future flood control work.

The Corps is trying to find ways to repair the 10,000 foot levy and reduce flooding at the tiny unincorporated area on the south side of the Kankakee River east of U.S. Route 41 and north of Lake Village, Ind.

Stepping in to push action on that project is the Newton County Board which recently earmarked \$300,000 for Sumava. That money is designated for construction work only, Jodi Melton, KRBC executive director, said. "It's not a Band-Aid and not for pumping."

Derickson also broached the idea of Indiana joining in a plan under discussion by Illinois and the Rock Island Corps office to study and remove sediments from the Kankakee River at the state line.

Unlike most Corps projects that move as slowly as sand in the river, this program can be completed in a "two-to-three year time span," Derickson said.

The project requires a local sponsor with 65 percent of the project coming from the Corps' Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration program. Illinois has expressed interest in targeting the sand build-up at the state line.

"The potential exists to extend the project across the line and include Indiana," Derickson said. He added that "all local cost shares can be in-kind work," a significant difference from the guidelines of the Corps feasibility study where both cash and in-kind cost shares are required.

KRBC also voted to retain three of its four officers and elected Brad Lawrence, a Stark County supervisor from Knox, as vice chairman.

Jack Nelson, who owns land on both sides of the state line, was elected to a second term as KRBC chairman. Also retained was Russ Punmroy of Kouts as secretary and Russ Collins of Kenland as treasurer. Lawrence replaces John McNamara of South Bend. McNamara, who has not attended a meeting this year, will continue as a commissioner representing St. Joseph County.