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Environmental LAW

Rediscovering the Genesee River

Often, the solution for protecting and improving natural resources is to minimize human interference with natural forces; but not always. The Genesee River is a case in point.

The river is partially tamed and controlled by the Mount Morris Dam, which for decades has protected the lower Genesee Valley and the City of Rochester from the flooding that was a regular occurrence before the dam was built. But the river forces that created the Letchworth gorge continue that work today.

Aided by agricultural practices that removed natural resistance to erosion, the Genesee River earns its brown color by eroding acres of upstream land every year, much of which is deposited as sediment at the mouth of the river in Charlotte, where it poses a constant challenge to commercial and recreational navigation.

The sediments also transport phosphorus and other chemicals that affect the water quality of the river and Lake Ontario, and specifically the Rochester embayment and its beaches and other recreational resources. But the Genesee River has many friends and admirers seeking to define its issues, evaluate the aesthetic and economic impacts, and define actions to restore the river to an equilibrium that minimizes erosion and pollution and enhances the river's appearance and recreational opportunities. To accomplish these ambitious goals, these friends of the river are looking for ways to cooperate, coordinate, raise public awareness and interest, and justify committing public and private resources by showing that undertaking projects to control erosion and the discharge of phosphorus will produce tangible and economically beneficial returns.



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and Wildlife Service, the NYS Soil and Water Conservation Committee and several Soil and Water Conservation Districts, SUNY Brockport, SUNY Geneseo, private marina owners, and the Black Creek and Oatka Creek watershed groups to define the causes and impacts of streambank erosion, soil loss and sediment transport in the Genesee River basin, and to outline proposals for what should be done if the money can be found.

The Genesee River watershed is almost entirely within New York State, except for the uppermost 15 miles that originates in Pennsylvania. Although only 144 miles long, the river's watershed includes more than 5,048 miles of rivers and streams and covers 2,373 square miles within New York State.

DEC has only recently (September 2015) released a Watershed Plan for the Genesee River Basin. The U.S. EPA has designed a template for watershed assessment that focuses on nine key elements. DEC has compiled reports from years of study of the river basin into a Genesee River Basin Nine Key Element

To promote this agenda, the Genesee RiverWatch, which is part of the Center for Environmental Initiatives, held its third annual Genesee River Basin Summit on May 25. The summit brought together representatives from the NYSDEC, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Fish

Watershed Plan that is available on DEC's website. The plan builds on a series of reports produced by Professor Joseph Makarewicz and his research group at SUNY Brockport.

These reports characterize the sources and amounts of phosphorus and sediments for the entire Genesee River basin. Professor Makarewicz presented a summary of his findings at the Summit. The reports estimate that the current sediment load to Lake Ontario from the Genesee River is 422,000 tons of soil a year and carries with it approximately one million pounds of phosphorus. The Genesee River releases more phosphorus into Lake Ontario than any source other than the Niagara River. In one 12 mile stretch of the river, 58 acres of land has been lost in 10 years.

The studies have identified sections of the river where the greatest loss of land to erosion occurs and multiple sources of phosphorus, including both point source (wastewater treatment plants) and non-point source pollution.

Streambank erosion and upland soil has contributed to the impairments caused by silt and sediment that affect the appearance of the water and the need to dredge the river to preserve navigability. The Nine Element Plan identifies a variety of best management practices to combat erosion, but no specific project.

The positive news from the Summit is that there is a broad consensus that the problems are not insurmountable and that erosion can be reduced. The benefits will be aesthetic in improved water quality and measurable in economic benefits of preserved farmland and a decreased need

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for dredging. The concept of developing a unified “whole basin” erosion control strategy was promoted at the Summit and endorsed.

George Thomas, the Executive Director of Genesee RiverWatch, proposed an ambitious 10-year plan to stabilize the riverbank at 114 locations along the entire length of the Genesee River at an estimated cost of \$32.5 million. Genesee RiverWatch estimates that the benefit of this streambank stabilization plan could be the preservation of 328 acres of farmland which will otherwise be eroded and carried downstream as sediment, and reduce the scope and cost of dredging and sediment removal projects at the mouth of the

river and at the Mt. Morris dam by up to 50%. As additional benefits from reduced erosion the plan projects fish habitat improvement, increased recreational use of the river and reduced discharge of phosphorus.

The Genesee River is not unappreciated. The 30-mile segment within Letchworth State Park is one of New York State’s prime tourist attractions and a natural wonder, and recreational use of the lower river at and around the port area has received a tremendous boost with the construction of a new marina. But that leaves many miles of the upper river south of Portageville, and the middle segment from Mt. Morris to Rochester, in relative obscurity.

There, local organizations and

individual counties are working to make improvements that ultimately benefit the entire river system. Genesee RiverWatch’s summits have drawn attention to their work, but also proposed a broader approach that clearly makes the case that streambank stabilization in Allegany County and elsewhere will produce direct and tangible benefits downstream. Improving the waterfront and beaches at Charlotte and Durand is linked to the preservation of farmland in Caneadea and elsewhere.

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