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Watershed Locally Addresses the Gulf of Mexico Dead Zone

Many of you may have heard about this before. However if you haven't it is important that you understand what this means and why is it a big deal here in Minnesota. The Gulf of Mexico Hypoxic Zone (dead zone) is caused by nutrients from the Mississippi River especially nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P). The Mississippi River begins in Minnesota and as the headwaters of this magnificent river our contributions eventually end up in the gulf. Locally the Sauk River Watershed District is currently partnering with other agencies to do our part in addressing the issues here and in the Gulf.

So why is this a big issue? After all we are thousands of miles away from the Gulf of Mexico. You may be asking yourself how we could be affecting the dead zone from so far away. It is important to also understand the large impacts of this issue. To give you an idea of how large the dead zone in Gulf of Mexico is the area is nearly the size of the state of New Jersey.

If you have followed the news with the oil spill lately it is not hard to connect the impacts and chain reaction that happens with a natural disaster. People see right now the effects that the oil spill has had on businesses, fisherman, tourism, and the fragile ecosystem as a whole. Until we have a personal connection to the issue it is not on our radar. Minnesota is fortunate to have a vast array of fresh water throughout the state. It is the mission of Sauk River Watershed District to monitor and protect these resources.

So what is getting into the Gulf exactly? These contributions of N and P come from runoff including, fertilizers, soil erosion, animal wastes, and sewage.

What happens once these nutrients enter the water in the Gulf? Excess nutrients promote increased changes on the algae growth and life cycle which takes over and depletes some of the oxygen in the water. The chain reaction is huge and has been linked to massive fish kills.

So why should you care? Projects implemented here in the Sauk River Watershed will address impairments to our local tributaries, lakes, and the Sauk River itself. In addition, if this trend continues to worsen, it will greatly impact the costal state economies by affecting seafood production, fishing, and tourism.

What are we doing about it locally? On a national level USDA decided to target areas in the Mississippi River Basin to address the Gulf of Mexico Dead Zone. In spring 2010, the Sauk River Watershed District (SRWD) was notified that the Sauk River Watershed was one of three watersheds in Minnesota that was selected to submit an application for funding from the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI). This program was released by the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS). The goal of the MRBI Program was to target areas along the Mississippi River Basin to address the Gulf of Mexico Hypoxic Zone and to have local NRCS and partners apply for this funding to work with producers in voluntary implementation of conservation practices. These practices would address nutrient runoff, improve wildlife habitat, and maintain



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agricultural productivity. The primary focus is to address and manage nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) within fields to minimize runoff and reduce downstream nutrient pollution.

The Sauk River Watershed District began coordinating efforts with the various partners within the Sauk River Watershed in April of this year. The partners included: county planning and zoning offices, soil and water conservation districts, NRCS, and environmental services offices in Todd, Douglas, Meeker, Pope and Stearns Counties. A meeting was held in Melrose on April 30, 2010 to brainstorm about the issues facing the Sauk River Watershed and to compile the various types of projects. Holly Kovarik, Administrator of the Sauk River Watershed District coordinated these efforts on behalf of the SRWD. Presentations were given by Tim Koehler, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist on the MRBI proposal procedures and by Holly Kovarik and Lynn Nelson of the Sauk River Watershed District on the water quality monitoring and data collected over the past 15 years within the Sauk River Watershed. These presentations aided in targeting where the locations were selected by the group to apply for the MRBI funding. "The Sauk River Watershed is fortunate to have been selected for this potential funding opportunity. These funds will aid in the efforts to continue to promote and implement projects on the landscape that will address our pollution issues and impaired waters, stated Administrator Kovarik.

Based on the meeting with the various agency partners within the Sauk River Watershed there were two applications completed. It was determined that these two applications would be jointly compiled to address the concerns facing the watershed. The first application was the Stearns MRBI proposal which would target funding for about 2/3 of the SRWD. The second application would primarily focus on wetland restoration activities within the Sauk River Watershed in Douglas and Todd Counties (headwaters of the Sauk River). These two proposals alone will help address impairments throughout the Sauk River Watershed from the top down.

In addition to the local partner agencies involved in this process, several state agency representatives were at this meeting to provide guidance on the application process and to aid in supply additional information to the application. These agencies included: Natural Resource Conservation Service, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Minnesota Department of Agriculture, USGS Minnesota Water Science Center Office, Board of Water and Soil Resources, Department of Natural Resources, US Forest Service, MN Milk Producers, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

President James Rothstein with the SRWD stated, "This funding will help landowners implement practices locally to address impairments in our area waters and eventually address the Gulf Hypoxia issue or the dead zone in the gulf. This is Minnesota doing their part in addressing the pollution issues and we all need to work together to make an impact on a larger scale. These funds are vital in helping landowners to address the issues. Agriculture is a vital industry in the state of Minnesota and the Sauk River Watershed District is committed to helping landowners remain viable while also protecting the water resources we so vitally depend on in this state."

Recently, USDA announced that the Sauk River Watershed was awarded funds for both of these applications submitted. The funding will be for a five year time frame beginning in 2010 and bring over 12 million dollars in funding for projects to be paid to landowners within the watershed. Please watch your local newspapers for additional information regarding this grant funding from your local NRCS or SWCD office in the following counties: Todd, Douglas, Pope and Stearns. The Sauk River Watershed District Board and Staff are committed to providing opportunities for landowners and citizens within the watershed. Administrator Kovarik stated, "This is a great result of your local agencies partnering to bring funding to our area. We are all working hard to address the impaired waters and issues throughout the watershed and this is another way we are helping to get it done. We are fortunate to have been selected. Now the work will begin."

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