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Jurisdiction

The geographic scope of the interview was Hillsdale County, Michigan. Hillsdale County is in south central Michigan on the Indiana border and adjoins the following St. Joseph River Watershed counties: Branch, MI; Calhoun, MI; and Steuben, IN. The easternmost portion of the watershed (the Headwaters River Valley Segment) covers about half of Hillsdale County and includes the Cities of Hillsdale and Jonesville and the Villages of North Adams and Allen. Major tributaries in the county include the headwaters of the St. Joseph River, Hog Creek, Sand Creek, and Beebe Creek. Most farms use minimum or no till practices and are dominated (about 90%) by corn and soybean production. Wheat and hay are also produced.

Programs/beneficial watershed features

Soils in the St. Joseph River watershed are generally well-drained and of little relative concern for runoff issues. However, well-drained, sandy soils are more likely to allow nutrients or pollutants to infiltrate to the groundwater. Most Conservation District activity occurs in the southernmost portion of the county, outside of the watershed due to the occurrence of soils that are more prone to generate runoff in the Lake Erie Basin.

Hillsdale County established a land planning commission to create land-use planning guidelines based the findings of a 1998 stakeholder survey. Stakeholders identified rural character, clean air, clean water, and clean lakes and streams as very important management goals. Suggested practices to reach these goals are to protect prime farmland, educate landowners on soil loss, protect wetlands, develop a surface water quality monitoring program, balance nutrient application with crop nutrient requirements, identify and protect environmentally sensitive areas, require new development to handle stormwater, recommend low impact development, and numerous other quality of life recommendations.

www.hillsdalecounty.info contains a wealth of county information including suggested land management goals and is available through the Land Information Access Association and made possible with funding provided by C. S. Mott and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the Michigan Council of Local Governments, and participating Units of Governments & Organizations in Hillsdale County.

Other features include:

- Sections of the Beebe Creek and St. Joseph Rivers listed as impaired by sediments on the 2000 MDEQ Non-Attainment List were removed from the 2002 list, but the reason for their removal is uncertain.
- The occurrence of natural buffer zones diminishes most agricultural runoff issues.
- Construction runoff is not a major concern.
- River setbacks are not an issue.
- Natural meanders are the norm for headwater channels.
- The community has a strong sense of rural character.
- Urban sprawl is not yet overwhelming, but is occurring mostly as individual homes are built on recently farmed land.

- Two lake associations exist in the watershed.
- The county has a current Resource Assessment (2001-2005) on file.

A watershed management plan is nearly complete for Hog Creek and the coordinators have applied for implementation funding this year.

Challenges in the watershed

Though the county is creating an ambitious land use plan, its outcomes will only be recommendations and therefore voluntary. Problems exist in this headwater portion of the watershed, but it should be recognized that most items in the following list represent isolated cases that local managers are aware of, and in many cases, working to address, particularly associated with the Hog Creek Watershed planning effort.

- Urban runoff from Jonesville and Hillsdale exists, but is thought to be minor.
- Some wetland loss is occurring.
- Some uncontrolled livestock access sites exist.
- Road stream crossing maintenance practices could be updated.
- Historic trash and litter dumping along streams has diminished but has not disappeared.
- Some connected drainage ditches are farmed right to the banks.
- Sandy soils generally increase the concern for groundwater contamination by spills or improperly applied nutrients or pesticides.
- Old and/or failing septic systems are a concern, particularly in the Beebe Creek area.
- Zebra mussels are present in BawBeese Lake and could continue to spread.
- Purple loosestrife is present in many areas, consistent with the rest of the region
- The location, condition, and environmental impact of historical drainage tiles is a concern and may warrant an investigation.
- High nitrates have been a problem in Litchfield Township groundwater.
- TFA – Tax Financing Authority have stormwater retention ponds in the City of Hillsdale and the Village of Jonesville. This has been a requirement as part of the State and Federal grants that have been used to develop these sites.
- Isolated livestock CAFO's exist but their voluntary management unknown.
- Goose populations are a concern in some areas.
- Private drainage ditches continue to be excavated with no soil erosion or sedimentation control provisions. This is not a huge issue but is a contributing factor to sediment issues in the watershed.

Additional needs for the jurisdiction

Riparian corridors are relatively intact in the area, and protecting and enhancing connections between these naturalized areas could improve biotic diversity. Top concerns identified during the interview included the need to:

- implement overall county-wide smart land use planning and make it enforceable.
- link critical habitat areas to promote biotic diversity.
- establish more locally active watershed/water body groups and include them in locally driven initiatives.
- identify and protect groundwater recharge areas.

Hillsdale is unique in that six major Great Lakes Basin watersheds flow out of the county, making the whole county a headwater area on that geographic scale.