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### Jurisdiction

Approximately 80% of Noble County drains to Lake Michigan via the St. Joseph River Watershed. Corn and soybeans are the major crops with some hay and wheat. The county is recognized for its high participation in USDA conservation programs and attainment of funding.

### Projects/beneficial watershed features

In response to a statewide push for locally led watershed initiatives, Noble County officials conducted stakeholder meetings in 1997 to identify and prioritize land management needs. Agricultural and urban stakeholders were both represented in the meetings. The Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) has used the priorities to guide various implementation projects in the county. Recent work includes EQUIP projects focused on the Upper South Branch of the Elkhart River and Cedar Creek Watershed and various LARE projects in the Wawasee Watershed. Noble County SWCD is one of the top recipients of funding in the state. In general, as a result of previous prioritization of stakeholder concerns, Noble County SWCD already coordinates its programs to tackle existing local needs.

Noble County is in the beginning stages of renewing its land use plan originally assembled in the 1960's. Once formed, a commission will update plans to reflect ongoing land management goals through condensed or revised codes and ordinances.

A Section 319 water quality grant provided funding to create a volunteer water quality monitoring program. Volunteer sampling results were tested against agency results, and it was concluded that volunteer monitoring can provide accurate water quality data for streams but less accurate data for lakes. Volunteers continue to provide data that is cataloged by the Noble County SWCD staff.

It was noted that Indiana counties in the St. Joseph River Watershed have built up a multi-county teamwork approach to watershed management based on an IDNR watershed guidance and support document. SWCD's regularly apply for joint funding, and a steering committee meets quarterly to coordinate ongoing projects. Coordination with Michigan counties has been lacking. Noble County is partnering with Elkhart County on a Solomon Creek project.

A unique grant involved hiring a consultant to identify agricultural best management practice (BMP) options in the Croft Ditch "Chain-of Lakes" Subwatershed using aerial photos. It was noted that the project was considered an excellent investment for understaffed districts and the overlay-maps are a useful tool for one-on-one meetings with landowners. Other counties have considering similar projects. State legislator support would be helpful for specific funding for this sort of work.

Noble County has adopted a stormwater drainage and erosion ordinance (based on Maumee River model ordinances) for new disturbance of plots greater than one acre that improves upon Indiana Rule 5 guidelines. Rome City is the only municipality that has not adopted the ordinance, but adoption is expected in the near future. The ordinance allows inspectors working with the surveyors office to stop work at sites with violations. Pamphlets summarizing BMPs for

developers are provided as guides when plots are smaller than one acre. A permanent government official is supported by building permit fees to monitor compliance, and turnaround for reviews is typically 1-2 weeks.

The SWCD holds meetings at individual farms and invites surrounding neighbors to explain their various programs. This proactive outreach strategy maintains the district's connections to landowners. First-time landowner participation in conservation programs after such meetings is very high. Conservation practices that support carbon sequestration and maintenance of greenspace is gaining interest, and new opportunities for federal support are available and growing in the county.

The state has Classified Forest and Natural Rivers programs. Designated preserve owners are exempt from taxes under the condition that development is restricted. The Pigeon River State Game area is a highly valued public preserve.

The County Surveyors office provides free seed to landowners for the banks of recently maintained ditches to assist the SWCD in promoting grassed filter strips.

#### Challenges in the watershed

Elkhart River impairments include pathogens and fish consumption advisories. Some lake water quality could be improved with septic systems but installation is not feasible and will require localized treatment clusters or other innovative techniques dependent on soil type. The county would like to address erosion and stormwater issues specific to gravel pits. And, as in any watershed, a subset of landowners maintains a distrust or disinterest in government programs or intervention.

#### Additional needs for the jurisdiction

Strong ties to the State Legislature are helpful in maintaining support for improvements. Noble County participates with other counties in an annual breakfast with Legislators to maintain an ongoing connection. In addition, Noble County has learned that building strong local teams requires pulling in as many established local groups as possible, such as Ducks Unlimited, Turkey Federation, and city and county officials.

It was suggested that to aid in bi-state initiatives, a permanent leader will need to emerge with desire to encourage long-term, bi-state efforts. Karen Mackowiak was mentioned as a potential leader.

Programming would be simplified if soil rental rates (amount paid to landowners for various federal land retirement/management programs) were the same across county lines. Standardized soil rates would simplify programs in areas where plots of land cross county lines.