WATERWAYS Program Gears Up For Spring

**Mohawk Workshop & Watershed Bus Tour**
April 24

We need the eyes, ears and hands of local residents to help us monitor Washington County Waterways. Workshop will be held at the PAC Building with monitoring stations at Riverside Park. Call for reservation.

**K-12 students are invited to participate in the second annual Champions Competition. This year’s theme is "Every Day Is Earth Day!" Medals & savings bonds will be awarded to the top three finalists in each age category.**

**Milwaukee River Clean Up**
May 15

You can help by volunteering a few hours of your time to collect garbage along the Milwaukee River. Headquaters will be set up in the lower M&I parking lot from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM. Rain or shine. Join us!!

**Storm Drain Stenciling Kickoff**
May 15-23

Help educate Washington County citizens about stormwater pollution by stencilling the message: "Dump No Waste, Drains to River" next to storm drains. All materials provided. Call ahead.

**Classroom Visits**

Clean Water One Step At A Time
Soil Tests: The Road Map to a Good Fertilizer Program

Submitted by Richard Prost, Nutrient Pest Management Specialist, UW-Extension

Can you imagine driving to a destination in Milwaukee, one that you have never been to before, without directions? You might get there, but you'll probably get confused and lost. In a way, this reflects the importance of having a proper soil test when developing a good fertilizer program, i.e., nutrient management plan. If you don't have current soil test reports for your farm, you will get confused and lost when determining and applying plant nutrients to meet crop needs.

You may ask, "Do I really need a soil test?" The answer is YES. Soil tests are the only practical way of determining the nutrient(s) and the amount(s) that must be supplied to satisfy crop needs. A soil test determines existing levels of available soil nutrients and recommends fertilizer applications to prevent any nutrient deficiency that may hinder crop production. For example, when nutrient supply drops below a "critical" level for a particular soil and crop, yield reduction will occur. Supplemental fertilizer applications based on soil test results allow the crops' nutrient demand to be met and at the same time avoids costly over-application of fertilizer.

The philosophy of University of Wisconsin's soil test program is to recommend nutrient applications at levels which, in combination with nutrients supplied by the soil, result in the best economic return for the grower. The current soil test recommendation system de-emphasizes the former build-up/maintenance philosophy in favor of a better balance between environmental and economic considerations. Clearly, over application of crop nutrients cost you money. But did you know that when soil test levels are in the excessively high range there is less than a 2% chance of increasing yield with additional fertilizer? Did you also know that there is a very good chance that many of your fields are in the excessively high range? The only way to find out is to soil test!

Soil testing has some limitations, but it is the best available tool for predicting crop nutrient needs. It is recommended that soil tests be taken at least every three years and preferably every other year on sandy and other soils of low buffering capacity. Remember that fertilizer recommendations are only as accurate as the soil samples collected. Samples that are unrepresentative of fields often result in recommendations that are misleading. In addition, field history information must be provided with the soil samples in order to accurately adjust the fertility recommendations to account for nutrient credits supplied by manure applications and legumes in the rotation.

Complete instructions for proper soil sampling are included in UWEX publication A2100, Sampling Soils for Testing. Detailed information on soil test recommendations is available in UW-EX publication A2809, Soil Test Recommendations for Field, Vegetable and Fruit Crops.
Sebo Recognized As Outstanding Conservation Employee

Conservation Technician, Paul Sebo was recognized with the 1999 Outstanding Conservation Employee Award. The Wisconsin Association of Land Conservation Employees selects one person each year for the award to acknowledge professional excellence among conservation technical staff in the state.

In his nomination, Paul was recognized for his excellent technical skills and his willingness and uncanny ability to train others in the conservation field.

He has been a Conservation Technician for the Washington County Land Conservation Department for the past 11 years. During that time Paul has planned, designed and installed countless soil and water conservation practices and has been very popular among landowners throughout the county. His supervisor praised him for his ability to adapt to and complete any assignment that has been “tossed” his way - with a sense of humor. (He is also known to have an incredible repertoire of jokes, which he is not afraid of using.)

It was also noted that Paul has been active in state association activities and has participated in a wide variety of training workshops, committees and other special projects. The award was presented at the association’s annual meeting in Stevens Point on March 17. Congratulations Paul!

County Conservationist Receives National Honors

County Conservationist, Perry Lindquist was recently presented the 1999 National Conservation District Professional Award by the National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA). The award is given to recognize professional excellence among the 3000 conservation districts across the nation. Lindquist, who has been head of the Washington County Land Conservation Department for the past 15 years, was praised for his leadership on a wide variety of initiatives, some of which have had statewide and national impact, including:

- Leading a statewide interagency process to develop and maintain technical standards for practices aimed to control soil erosion and reduce water pollution

- Initiating several state legislative efforts aimed to improve soil and water conservation programs and funding

- Leading the development of a model stormwater management and erosion control ordinance, which is now being adopted by many communities

- Applying computer technology to aid field staff in conservation planning and improve program tracking capabilities

- Helping establish an innovative environmental education program and top notch technical services for Washington County residents.

Congratulations Paul and Perry
In the early 1990’s, Ross Bishop was beginning to feel some pressure. As the manager of a 700 acre farm (located in Jackson) with over 300 beef cattle he knew that erosion control was becoming a major requirement of most farm programs. He also knew that his rotation offered few conservation options.

To deal with the problem, Bishop began to research a practice called no-till and at the advice of his crop consultant attended the 1995 National No-Till Conference in St Louis, Missouri. It was a decision he never regrets and has attended the annual conference ever since. In fact, this past January, Ross convinced two other local farmers, Paul Puesto and Herb Lofy, to attend.

The National No-Till Conference brings together people from all parts of the country to discuss no-till farming.

Ross claims the best part of the conference is networking with other farmers. “Often, one farmer will raise a problem they are facing and inevitably another will get up to describe a similar situation and how he was able to overcome it,” says Bishop.

In fact, many of the speakers are farmers themselves. There are also a wide variety of industry and university professionals on hand to share the latest technology and research.

Although complying with government programs is what initiated his conservation tillage methods, improving soil quality and health is what really interested Ross. “It has given me a greater appreciation for soil as a resource. I’ve learned that doing as little tillage as possible over the course of several years greatly increases soil tilth, structure, organic matter and microbial activity. The soil becomes like a sponge.”

According to Bishop, indicators of this are the increased numbers of worms in the soil, which result in better nutrient cycling and water infiltration. Research has shown these critters improve the soil by breaking down organic matter to usable nutrients and in creating the tunnels which allow greater infiltration of rain.

“Moldboard plowing, disking and other aggressive types of tillage destroy these vital soil properties,” says Bishop.

One of the new topics discussed at the conference was the release of carbon from the soil into the atmosphere. Carbon is a greenhouse gas and new research indicates that tillage opens up the ground and allows the release of stored carbon. Next to permanent grass, no-till is the best way to keep carbon in the ground where it serves as a vital link to maintaining high organic matter.

The No-Till Conference offers fresh ideas that attendees can immediately implement on their farms. However...”patience, persistence and attention to detail” are necessary traits for successful no-till farming,” says Bishop.

It may take 5 or more years of minimum tillage in order to get the soil quality to a level where the yields are profitable. Bishop feels his soil quality is finally at a comfortable level for doing true no-till with his wheat, alfalfa and soybean crops. He will also no-till his corn if the conditions are right and time is short, but has learned that a minimum amount of tillage (called “zone-tillage”) works best for corn.

If you are interested in learning more about no-till or the annual No-Till Conference... please give us a call at 414-335-4800.
Travelling Laptop Used for Erosion Survey

It is very difficult to measure the progress of most soil and water conservation programs. We can generate a lot of numbers with program sign-ups, cost sharing dollars, practices installed, etc...but what does it all mean? Is it making a difference on the landscape?

This spring we will find out the answer to that question for at least one part of our program efforts – cropland soil erosion. It is part of a statewide effort to establish trends in erosion rates based on a statistically reliable sampling in each county. It is called a "transect survey", named after the method of data collection. The survey results will be compared to data collected 12 years ago to see if cropland erosion rates are coming down and if program goals are being met.

In Washington County, a driving (or transect) route has been established that crisscrosses the entire county in 1-2 mile segments. Over 600 random field-sampling points have been marked along the route on digital aerial photographs. As soon as crops have been planted, technical staff will be stopping at each selected field with a laptop computer to calculate the rate of soil erosion, based on slopes, soil types and a variety of farming practices.

So, if you happen to witness this strange looking exercise, don’t fret. We are not trying to single out any “problem site”. All the data is randomly collected and no names are involved. In fact, because of the methods used, the results can only serve as a county wide or regional average. If you are curious about how the work is done, feel free to stop by.

Washington County Residents Can Participate in Clean Sweep At Port Washington Facility

Get rid of the hazardous items not collected in your regular trash pickup. Call 414-268-7101 for a price schedule and directions to Superior Special Services in Port Washington. Clean Sweep will be offered every Monday from 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM and the first Saturday of each month from 8:00 AM till 12:00 PM.
Farmland Preservation Changes Need Review

Editorial by: Perry Lindquist, County Conservationist

At a time when growth management is a hot issue locally and across the state, Governor Thompson has proposed sweeping changes to the Farmland Preservation Program. The changes are part of his 99-01 state budget, which would take effect in July. So far, the proposal is getting mixed reviews by local officials.

Let’s take a look at some of the program basics - and see why this may be too much to attempt to resolve in a budget bill.

The Program At A Glance
The original program was established in 1977 with three goals in mind: 1) provide property tax relief to farmers; 2) reduce the loss of prime farmland to development; and 3) reduce soil erosion rates on cropland. (The soil conservation provisions were expanded in 1985.)

In a nutshell, the program relies on a “carrot and stick” approach. Claiming the tax credit is voluntary, contingent on the farmer meeting certain farmland preservation and soil conservation requirements. In urbanizing areas, such as Washington County, towns need to adopt exclusive agricultural zoning before a farmer can be eligible for the tax credit. However, this requirement was temporarily removed for three years - between 1989 and 1991.

Has the Program Worked?
Well, that depends on where you look and who you talk to. Program participation in Washington County, consistently one of the fastest growing areas of the state, has been nothing to brag about.

Only about half of the towns ever adopted exclusive agricultural zoning. A few dozen farmers in the other towns signed individual farmland preservation contracts with the state during the 3-year rule change. Overall, about 19% of county farmers participated in the program last year. Also, for the past 4 decades, the rate of farmland lost to development has remained at about 650 acres per year.

Where To From Here?
The Governor’s proposal has a lot of merit. It would get the state out of zoning issues and land contracts and focus on the conservation provisions. It also tries to encourage the use of “purchase of development rights” programs to minimize conversion of farmland.

The proposal recognizes that: 1) recently adopted “use value assessment” laws will help reduce farm property taxes; 2) land use planning is a local issue and needs to be more comprehensive; and 3) environmental standards for farms are getting tougher.

However, government programs, and the reasons for their success or failure, don’t get much more complex than this one. Farmland Preservation touches on a wide array of political, economic, social, and legal issues. Is it realistic to try to “fix” the program in a few months, as a small part of a 1500 page budget document?

Careful review is needed to ensure that there are enough incentives left for the “new” program to be effective. Local officials, who have the most experience working with farmland preservation issues, need to be more involved in the debate. After all, that is where any new ideas will ultimately be proven – good, or otherwise.
Wildlife Damage Must Be Reported Early

The Washington County Land Conservation Committee reminds county farmers to watch newly planted crops for damage from wildlife and to report it to Wildlife Services as soon as possible. In order to be eligible for any compensation claims later, the damage must be reported within 14 days of occurring.

The county contracts for wildlife damage abatement and claims services through the Horicon office of Wildlife Services, a USDA agency. Some other basic program eligibility requirements include:

- You must own the crop.
- You must allow public hunting (open or managed options).
- You must call 10 days prior to crop harvest for an appraisal if you plan to submit a damage claim.
- You must follow any abatement measures recommended by Wildlife Services.

Damage by deer, geese and turkey is covered under the program. There is a maximum claim limit of $15,000, with a $250 deductible. For additional information on program rules or to discuss crop damage concerns, call Wildlife Services at 1-800-433-0663.

The Trees Are Coming!!!

Mark your calendars!
Tree distribution is Thursday, April 29 from 1:00 PM to 7:00 PM and Friday, April 30 from 8:00 AM to 12:30 PM. Confirmations have been mailed....if you did not receive yours call our office at 414-335-4800.

Land & Water Plan Informational Meeting

You are invited to this important meeting on Thursday, May 20 @ 7:00 PM the UW-Washington County (Room #201) in West Bend. The meeting will kick off a planning process that will guide future land and water conservation efforts in Washington County. Your thoughts and concerns are very important to us. Please plan on attending.

Take a Step

If you are interested in any of the WATERWAYS Programs being offered this spring take a step, please call Education Coordinator, Sue Millin at 414-335-4800 or e-mail her at lcdsue@co.washington.wi.us
Congratulations to Harvey Hembel for his correct identification of the last “Where In the County?” Harvey is the lucky winner of a wildflower identification book!

This “snowman awaiting winter” is located on the Peters Property on Pleasant Valley Road just west of the new county fairgrounds. Kudos to the Peters for their sharing their creativity with all who pass by!

Where in the County?

Where is this site located? Write your answer on a 3x5 card along with your name, address & phone number. Mail to: Where in the County?, Washington County Land Conservation Dept, 333 E. Washington St, Suite 3200, West Bend, WI 53095 One correct entry will be drawn to win a deluxe car wash coupon!