



LITTLE PLOVER RIVER WATERSHED ENHANCEMENT PROJECT EXCEEDS EXPECTATIONS

WPVGA works with Village of Plover, governmental and conservation groups to enhance waterway

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, Badger Common'Tater

When the Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project Team convened, in February 2017, to discuss ways to meet the team's goals, the Village of Plover saw great potential.

"Our progress has far exceeded village expectations," says Dan Mahoney, Village of Plover administrator. "We are fortunate

22 BC'T November

to be working with many great collaborators from our community and beyond to restore the health of local waters."

The Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project (LPRWEP) is a multi-party collaboration convened by the Village of Plover and the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association (WPVGA) to



Above: On August 19, 2020, Tracy Hames (left), executive director of the Wisconsin Wetlands Association, gave a tour of the upper section of the Little Plover River to parties interested in the progress of current and ongoing restoration efforts.

improve the health of the Little Plover River and the quality of life of the surrounding community.

The Wisconsin Wetlands Association, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Portage County Land Conservation Department and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

(DNR) make up the core team of project advisors.

Montgomery and Associates supports the project through hydrological and ecological fieldwork and analysis.

The LPRWEP aims to use best available data and voluntary conservation actions to achieve the following goals:

- Increase the flow and improve the aquatic health of the Little Plover River
- Improve surface and groundwater connections and water retention across the Little Plover River watershed
- Alleviate storm-water-driven flooding
- Improve and expand fish and wildlife habitat and public recreation opportunities and access

On August 19, 2020, Tracy Hames, executive director of the Wisconsin Wetlands Association, gave a tour of

“The prairie restoration is going so well that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said we don’t need to conduct controlled burns this year, but periodic burning will be an important tool to maintain healthy habitat conditions moving forward.”

– *Tracy Hames*

the upper section of the Little Plover River to parties interested in the progress of the LPRWEP.

A mere five miles long and located at the base of a moraine, the Little Plover River is a Class 1 trout stream. Yet, there have been decades of controversy surrounding it and whether there is reduced water flow because of agricultural practices, village wells or weather- and landscape-related issues.

“When you have everyone agree to collaborate on a solution, there’s a lot of power,” Hames remarked during the tour. “A partnership was developed, and we’re working shoulder-to-shoulder to address issues in a non-regulatory manner.”

“This is what we do—watershed-scale restoration. We want to be able to demonstrate how it can be done,” Hames said.

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Since the project started, the Little Plover River has been flowing above the minimum 4cfs (cubic feet per second) rate as set by the DNR as the public rights stage.

"You can have a healthy river in an agriculture landscape," Hames stressed. "In order to do that, we

have to bring back a semblance of how it looked and acted historically, but in a modern landscape."

To accomplish that goal, the Project Team has been thinning out forest through pine and oak management, cutting trees that are not part of the historic landscape; filling in a

Above: During the tour, Jason Behrends, a restoration operations manager for Heartland Ecological, explained that the land has transitioned to both dryland and wetland with a mosaic of vegetation.

large agricultural drainage ditch at the head of the river; dealing with the river form through channel



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FLOODPLAIN & FORESTRY EXPERTS

The LPRWEP convened a team of fishery, floodplain and forestry experts from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point to help design and implement restoration and management practices, improve channel structure and reconnect the Little Plover River to its historic floodplain.

"The river was historically 5.3 feet wide, and the land was open wet meadow and prairie," Hames explained. "When we began studying it, some parts of the river were 40 feet wide."

"We know," he continues, "most of the erosion occurs during a short run-off period each year, causing the channel to change form, in this case from narrow and deep to shallow and wide."

"An agriculture ditch that was constructed decades ago was contributing to the flashy, erosive flows and causing groundwater to bypass the upper two miles of river," Hames said.

The team physically narrowed the channel itself, and upon doing so, the river immediately started to become deeper by 1.5 to 2 feet. The river bottom has been changed, too, from sand to gravel.

"By filling in the agriculture ditch and raising the groundwater level," Hames said, "it increased the flow in the upper part of the Little Plover River substantially."

"We have been working on issues

Above: The Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project (LPRWEP) is a multi-party collaboration convened by the Village of Plover and the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association that includes the Wisconsin Wetlands Association, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Portage County Land Conservation Department, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and others.



related to the Little Plover River for many years," says WPVGA Executive Director Tamas Houlihan, "and in April of 2017, the Water Task Force [developed by the WPVGA to support the sustainable use of

water resources] approved a funding request from the Village of Plover for approximately \$64,000 to help get this project started."

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The money helped launch the project and has been combined with grants and awards from the Natural Resource Conservation Service, State of Wisconsin, Wisconsin DNR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and others, as well as in-kind matches by all of the LPRWEP partners, to fund restoration efforts. It has quickly become a multi-million dollar project.

MUNICIPAL WELLS

Mahoney explains that, as a user of groundwater, the village recognized that its municipal wells affect the Little Plover River and watershed.

The Village of Plover has altered the pumping regimen of its wells to minimize impacts to the Little Plover River. "In the past, 70 percent of the water pumped by the village wells was pumped from the two wells located within a quarter-mile of the Little Plover River," Mahoney notes.



Above: Tracy Hames (center) stands in what is left of an old agriculture drainage ditch that has been filled in to help return flow to the upper river as part of the Little Plover River Watershed Enhancement Project.

"The pumping regimen was changed several years ago so that now 70 percent of the village's water is pumped from Well #3, which is located two miles away from the

Little Plover River," he says.

Potato and vegetable grower Myron Soik & Sons agreed to sell approximately 60 acres of land to

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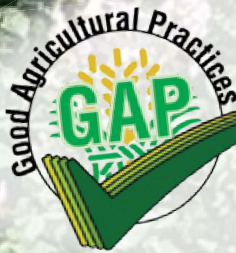
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the Village of Plover, land that has since been converted from irrigated agriculture to wetlands and upland prairie.

"The village worked with the Soik family (including Bruce, Curt and Mark), and the acquisition resulted in the elimination of one high-capacity well in the headwaters of the Little Plover River," Mahoney relates.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Village of Plover signed an agreement whereby USFWS created wetland on a portion of the Little Plover River Conservancy Area and provided upland prairie planting seed for the conservancy area and the Soik property.

During the tour, Jason Behrends, a restoration operations manager for Heartland Ecological, explained that the land has transitioned to both dryland and wetland with a mosaic of vegetation.

NATIVE PRAIRIE & GRASSLAND

"We are reestablishing native prairie and grassland," Behrends said. "First, we managed seed installations and spot herbicide treatments, did some mowing and allowed the seed mix to mature."

"The prairie restoration is going so well that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said we don't need to conduct controlled burns this year," Hames relayed to the tour group, "but periodic burning will be an important tool to maintain healthy habitat conditions moving forward."

The Portage County Land Conservation Department is assisting in this project, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reviewed and approved the restoration plan.

In addition, the DNR and U.S. Army Corps approved the proposed restoration plan for the Wisconsin Wetland Conservation Trust project

on the Soik property.

"The primary goal is to protect the Little Plover River watershed and its associated streams, lakes and wetlands," Houlihan remarks, "while promoting a sustainable agricultural industry."

"We also plan to improve and expand wildlife habitat in the watershed for ecological benefits and increased public opportunity for outdoor recreation," Houlihan says.

Other LPRWEP initiatives include the repair of leaky infrastructure within the Village of Plover, improved infiltration and previously mentioned activities to reduce water usage.

There is great need to solve water resource issues in the Wisconsin Central Sands area, and the LPRWEP is leading the way in that effort. **BCT**

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