

Monroe County Conservation District is continuing to raise the alarm over “dirty dirt” — polluted fill masquerading as landscape soil.

Monroe County Conservation District Board Meeting February 16th, 2023

The district board discussed strategy during the March meeting, noting that several homeowners in Middle Smithfield Township recently accepted a total of more than 30 loads of the fill on five different lots. One of the sites dumped fill into a wetland, which is a separate violation.

The district monitors earthmoving and other activities that can cause pollution when soil or other material makes its way into nearby streams or rivers, endangering fish and aquatic life. Fill that is polluted with construction waste or other contaminants presents an even greater threat to water quality.

In recent years the district has flagged many building or landscaping sites where haulers from New York or New Jersey have offered the fill free to takers. Those states' environmental rules are stricter than Pennsylvania's.

The sites were referred to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, whose solid waste section will follow up.

Meanwhile, district staff and the board are working to raise public awareness of the problem.

“I will update COG,” the Monroe County Council of Governments, District Manager Kristina Heaney told the board, “and get out a bunch of these posters.” The DEP has provided posters highlighting the “dirty dirt” problem.

Heaney said the district will be visiting community groups and contacting homeowners' associations, where most of the dirty fill issues arise.

The district will also remind state elected officials, who can publicize the problem at their district offices and on their websites. State Rep. Tarah Probst, D-176 attended the meeting on Zoom, and expressed a willingness to help, reminding the district that state Rep. Maureen Madden, D-189, “has a 100 percent rating for conservation. We actually care about the environment,” Probst said, “and will do what you want us to do.” The district will also remind state representative Jack Rader and state Sen. Rosemary Brown.

“We're heading into the spring push, where people are doing landscaping,” Heaney said. “We will work on a clean fill strategy and a push for April — It maybe will prevent some of the complaints.”

The board also discussed buffers around waterways, and the need to maintain the minimum 150-foot protection zone, designed to protect water quality. Board member Craig Todd noted that some municipalities are considering “a significant retreat from the buffers” at a time when they are required to renew their stormwater ordinances to comply with the newly updated stormwater management plan, under Act 167, for the Brodhead, McMichael and Tobyhanna watersheds.

Act 167 requires counties to develop watershed-based stormwater management plans that reflect the needs of the watershed and protect water quality and quantity. Municipalities are required to renew their stormwater ordinance by May 2.

On April 14, the district will hold a bus tour for zoning officers, supervisors and other municipal officials to educate them on the cost-benefit ratio of buffers and other “best management practices” for stormwater. These BMPs are included in the Act 167 model ordinance that municipalities are considering for renewal.

Heaney assured Todd that the district has already drafted a letter strongly recommending to municipalities that “a 150-foot (buffer) should be a minimum unless you can input scientifically proven” reasons for less.

District hydraulic engineer Drew Wagner “is very passionate about this,” Heaney said. “We will be addressing that as expeditiously as possible.”

Head Resource Conservationist Lori Kerrigan said district technical staff also will be working with the county Planning Commission once the May 2 deadline has passed to create a summary of local buffer requirements.

In other business, the board approved East Stroudsburg Elementary School fourth-grade teacher Christopher Tosh as Teacher of the Year. He will be honored at an upcoming board meeting.

The board also heard from Environmental Education Coordinator Roger Spotts that close to 400 people attended two public maple sugaring days on recent Saturdays; and that the district will launch a new kayak program.

The next district board meeting will be on April 20th at 10AM.

Respectfully submitted by Paula C. Heeschen