

MONROE COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Board meeting - August 17, 2023

BWA Report from Paula Heeschen

Sometimes paying penalties is cheaper than complying with conservation rules, the Monroe County Conservation District board heard in August.

District Manager Kristina Heaney and Head Resource Conservationist Lori Kerrigan spoke on the issue at the Aug. 17 board meeting.

Kerrigan addressed a Stroudsburg development site that, earlier this year, the district referred for enforcement to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. It's since been resolved through voluntary compliance.

But, Kerrigan said, "It was the second time for that individual to come to the table" for repeat violations. Repeat infractions raise the issue to a higher level, she said, noting that at times it's cheaper and easier for a developer to break conservation rules knowingly and pay a fine than it is for them to comply with regulations in the first place.

"There are contractors in the Lehigh Valley who build fines into their contracts," Heaney added.

State Conservation District law requires the conservation of soil, water and other natural resources through controlling and preventing soil erosion, controlling runoff to reduce floods, helping municipalities develop stormwater management plans, and other activities. The law designates conservation districts as the "primary local government unit" responsible for caring out measures to conserve resources.

Such conservation efforts aim “to promote the health, safety and general welfare of the people of the Commonwealth,” the law states.

Monroe’s conservation district has a Level III delegation agreement with the DEP. The agreement authorizes the district to provide more direct, local input into construction permit reviews. The district works with DEP to address construction sites that technicians conclude violate conservation law and regulations.

Board member Craig Todd asked Kerrigan and Heaney if it would be possible for monthly reports to include the amount of penalties when the DEP issues them.

“It’s public information. I’d be interested to know what those penalties were,” Todd said. “One of the reasons we went to Level III was because (DEP-issued) penalties were so low.”

Heaney and Kerrigan agreed to include penalty amounts going forward

In other business, the district continues to work with state officials toward resolving a problematic development site in Mount Pocono.

A heavy rain sent mud-laden stormwater from the warehouse construction project, on a former golf course along Route 940, across the busy Five Points intersection on July 30.

The district initiated an enforcement action with the DEP, and Heaney reported at the meeting that they are working toward voluntary compliance.

She added that the DEP recommended that the builders cease work while discussions continue, but “they continue to work on it.”

She declined to comment further.

The district board also heard that:

* The district's Environmental Education staff brought in additional revenue this year in large part by offering more camps. The staff now are scheduling school programs and public tours of the Tannersville Cranberry Bog.

* Linemen from PPL helped plant trees at the Sand Spring Run stream bank restoration site. Heaney gave kudos to the 15 volunteer linemen, who were fulfilling an environmental commitment by the utility. The work involved planting 150 trees at the site near Mount Pocono. Mostly upland tree species went into the rocky ground of an old rail bed by the stream, which is a tributary to Pocono Creek.

* Use of the district's no-till drill is rising slowly as more farmers learn of it.

* Populations of the invasive spotted lantern fly are down this year, likely because of dry conditions in the spring and early summer. "It means they could be even worse "next year, Heaney said. "Every generation is getting stronger."

One bright spot is that the flies have been around long enough that natural reduction is occurring. Birds are eating them, Heaney said.

The next board meeting is at 10 a.m. Thursday, Sept. 21 at the district offices in Bartonsville.

Respectfully submitted,

Paula C. Heeschen