

MONROE COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT REPORT ON JANUARY'S MEETING

Local soil conservationists plan to work during 2024 to improve a West End beef cow farm and protect neighboring streams. The goal is to keep soil and manure on the land and out of Pine Creek, a tributary to Princess Run and then to Buckwha Creek, improving overall water quality in the watershed. Monroe County Conservation District Watershed Specialist David Hooker outlined the plan for the district board on Jan. 18.

A \$407,599 Growing Greener grant with a matching \$420,163 funds from the Natural Resources Conservation Fund is covering the project's cost. The effort will establish agricultural best management practices on a 119-acre farm in Ross Township near Saylorburg. Owned by Kathryn and Bruce Brown, the farm has about 115 beef cows and is preserved under the county's Preserved Farmland Program.

The project calls for building a roof over a heavy-use area, adding roofed manure storage, installing 2,300 feet of exclusionary fencing to keep animals out of the stream, and building two stabilized stream crossings across Pine Creek. The plan also will create a 500-foot diversion structure to manage a 25-year storm, and a 200-foot, lined waterway and rock outlet designed to manage stormwater flows the diversion might create. The plan includes a watering system to enable rotational grazing.

All these measures will help stabilize soil and nutrient-rich manure that otherwise might pollute the waterways.

Experts from the NRCS will design and inspect the project with help from district staff. The district hopes to put the project out for bid this spring and to complete the work by the end of the summer.

In other business, head Resource Conservationist Lori Kerrigan told the board that the district's technical staff posts far shorter development plan review times than the state average. She called attention to the year-end report covering 2023, noting that Monroe's review times, averaging 57 business days, are well below the state average of 107 business days.

Project permitting reviews range from large-scale proposals such as the Swiftwater Solar development, which involves installing solar collectors on a formerly wooded tract, to residential and commercial plans, to distribution warehouses, to plans to install, on utility poles, devices to deter birds. The pole devices don't involve earth disturbance but do require review and permitting.

Besides project plan reviews, the technical staff responds to complaints ranging from possible illegal dumping to odors. District Manager Kristina Heaney said that given "the complexity of the complaints and the action plans, we've been doing more ..." than may be readily apparent in numbers on the year-end report.

"I give a lot of congratulations and props to the technical side" for their hard work, Heaney added.

Heaney's own report highlighted hazard mitigation planning for the county has started; it's a two-year process that involves helping municipalities plan improved stormwater management and buffers.

"This is a great opportunity for us to help them where they're struggling," she said. She and other staff members also recently met with state Department of Environmental Protection sewer module planning personnel. The district's engineers hope to improve communication with municipalities to better coordinate stormwater management and sewage module planning, the better to protect streams from storm-related pollution.

Heaney called the DEP's anti-degradation policy "incredible," adding that improved county-state coordination if it succeeds, could serve as a model for elsewhere in the state.

District Environmental Education Coordinator Roger Spotts highlighted the EE program's activities, noting that the staff is gearing up for maple sugaring. Public days are planned for March 2 and 9, along with small groups and school classes.

Overall, Spotts said, EE section activities are at the level they were before the COVID 19 pandemic, with 2023 posting the highest income yet from activities.

"It's been a record-breaking year for them and their staff is coming up with some great, innovative ideas," Heaney said.

Also at the January board meeting, board Chairman Robert Armstrong swore into a new term members Sharon Laverdure, a county commissioner; Craig Todd, board secretary; and Roger McFadden, board treasurer; and the board re-elected Armstrong, Todd, McFadden, and board Vice Chairman Brian Winot to their positions.

The next district board meeting is at 10 a.m. Thursday, Feb. 15 at the district offices in Bartonsville.

Respectfully submitted,
Paula C. Heeschen
For the BWA