

Crops

MDA takes on watershed project

By PAULA MOHR

FUNDING now appears to be the only obstacle facing farmers and environmentalists who want to conduct conservation research in the Root River watershed.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture will administer the project that previously was part of a Monsanto Co. initiative to invest \$375,000 in the Root River watershed. However, that funding was withdrawn by Monsanto early last month after company officials discussed concerns raised by members of the Minnesota Soybean Growers Association.

MSGa says the proposed water-quality monitoring project would have had a negative impact on production agriculture because it did not take into account the state's Total Maximum Daily Load-Impaired Water process and that "natural background" contributions to water quality were not yet established for the watershed. MSGa and other farm organizations had concerns that the initiative implied that only farming practices cause runoff.

Key Points

- MDA will oversee a Root River watershed project.
- Minnesota Ag Water Resources Council will provide input.
- Funding is uncertain at this time.

"Those involved in the Monsanto initiative on the Root River simply would be monitoring the water. Monitoring only identifies that water is impaired," says Bill Gordon, MSGA vice president. "Monitoring doesn't use research to find out what the impairment is or why the impairment is there. Nor does it find out where it's coming from before implementing changes."

After meetings that included MDA, MSGa, Monsanto and the Minnesota Ag Water Resources Coalition, all entities agreed to move forward on the project. MDA's Pesticide and Fertilizer Management Division will oversee efforts, and the water resources coalition will provide input from its farm members. Funding for the Root River project could come through a

legislative initiative.

Part of a larger project

The Root River is only part of a \$5 million Upper Mississippi River initiative announced by Monsanto last December. The company is working in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, the National Audubon Society, the Iowa Soybean Association and Delta Wildlife on projects that would reduce nutrient and sediment movement into the Mississippi, and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico. The other projects will continue to move forward as planned with oversight by The Nature Conservancy.

The conservancy will conduct a three-year conservation pilot in three watersheds in the Upper Mississippi River basin: the Pecatonica River in southern Wisconsin, the Boone River in northern Iowa and the Mackinaw River in central Illinois.

TNC will continue to work with MDA and soil and water conservation districts in Mower and Fillmore counties, says Vince Shay, director of TNC's Upper Mississippi River pro-

gram. "As long as the partnership continues to advance the objectives that all have agreed upon, we remain committed," Shay says.

Under the original proposed project, water-quality monitoring field sites would have been 100 to 300 acres in size and targeted to each landscape, he says. The 1 million-acre watershed has glacial tilt plain on the west, karst topography in the middle and bluff lands to the east. In the west, one field site might have monitored water in a controlled tile drain and woodchip bioreactor. In the karst region, another site might have contained an infiltration pond and woodchip bioreactor.

Overall, the goal was to establish baseline data, apply selected conservation practices, and monitor changes at the edges of fields and in the watershed, Shay says.

With MDA involvement, however, the future project will be more in-depth.

"Agriculture often gets mentioned as the likely cause or only cause of water impairments," says MDA Commissioner Gene Hugoson. "We want this project

to be viewed as a legitimate scientific approach [to improving water quality]. We want to find out the situation, do the research, do the monitoring, know what we're dealing with and apply management."

Same goal

Gordon says Minnesota's farmers and ranchers want clean water. "In addition to what we do as individuals on our farms — buffer strips, waterways, terrace systems, etc. — we're working with the Legislature to ensure that public agencies in charge of water quality are doing all they can to ensure that good science is used to find out what is naturally occurring and what is influenced by management," Gordon says.

Minnesota Corn Growers Association President Doug Albin echoes Gordon's sentiment on farmer involvement.

"We take the health of our water resources seriously, and we've been proactive in researching and adopting new technologies," Albin says. Future water-quality projects must look at all possible causes of impairment, he adds.

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