



ST. JOSEPH RIVER BASIN COMMISSION

2021 Annual Report

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Our Mission

To conserve, enhance, and promote the health of the St. Joseph River Basin by connecting people, ideas and resources in an effort to increase understanding and collaboration.

Our Vision

To have healthy lakes & streams in the St. Joseph River Basin.

Our Core Values

Communication - Establishing connection and cooperation among local governments and key stakeholders.

Transparency - Promoting honest and trustworthy information concerning the health of our watershed and the policies that impact it.

Understanding - Providing context for watershed data and observations to inform management decisions.

Contact Us

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About Us

The St. Joseph River Basin Commission was established by the Indiana General Assembly in 1988 to improve water quality, encourage conservation and increase coordinated management of water resources in the St. Joseph River Basin.

The Commission provides technical assistance, sponsors studies, supports demonstration projects and coordinates information sharing opportunities for local governments throughout the basin. It also serves as a liaison between federal and state water resource agencies and local land and water managers.

The Commission is led by a governing board of mayors, county commissioners, surveyors, health officers, and representatives from soil & water conservation districts and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. A complete list of members is included on the last page. These individuals and their proxies provide oversight and direct the activities of the Commission.

A letter from the Director:

The makeup of the Commission has changed a lot since I started in 2016, and the opportunities for collaboration across political boundaries, and between various departments of local government are greater than ever. The increase in participation and support from our members demonstrates the shared value of our water resources and infrastructure. Wetlands, sewers, lakes, ditches, storm drains, floodplains, septic tanks, streams, and rivers all play an important role in creating healthy communities. The broad makeup of our Commission ensures that each of these components is considered when making decisions. I am honored to serve, and help unite such a diverse group of stakeholders in an effort to improve water quality and reduce the impact of flooding on our communities.

Sincerely,

Water Monitoring

The Commission secured a grant from the Indiana Academy of Sciences in 2021 to launch a new long-term water monitoring program. This program will establish baseline information and track stream health at 12 sites along small tributaries in primarily rural areas of the watershed. With sites in Michigan and Indiana, it expands on the existing water monitoring efforts conducted by the cities of South Bend, Elkhart, and Goshen, which are focused on primarily urban portions of the St. Joseph and Elkhart Rivers.

Water monitoring can be done in a number of different ways, from measuring chemical characteristics and quantitative features such as flow and nutrient loading, to looking at the types of organisms living in the water. The Commission's new program determines stream health by collecting and identifying macroinvertebrates such as snails and aquatic insects that live on rocks, sand, and plants in the stream. The diversity of these species can reflect the health of a waterbody because they vary in their sensitivity to different pollutants that impact streams, such as nutrients and road salts. Sites with high macroinvertebrate diversity and representation by various sensitive species are

indicative of good water quality, while low diversity and high numbers of pollution-tolerant organisms suggest degraded conditions. Macroinvertebrates were collected from each monitoring site by deploying Hester-Dendy samplers, which are colonized by macroinvertebrates over the summer. The samplers were retrieved in the fall and sent to the Midwest Biodiversity Institute, where all the critters that colonized the samplers will be identified. After the identification is completed, Commission staff will write reports and provide presentations on the findings from the 2021 monitoring season.

The Commission has also begun working on compiling and interpreting existing water monitoring data collected by partners on both sides of the basin. An exciting new project is underway to build an interactive web map that will host monitoring data throughout the basin and serve as an educational tool for anyone who wants to know how the water is doing.



MACOG staff member Sofia Gladun preparing to deploy samplers in Pigeon Creek in Steuben County.



A Hellgrammite, an indicator of good water quality, collected from the Coldwater River.



Volunteer Cindy Bailey preserving samples retrieved from Nottawa Creek.

Noble County Flood Resilience

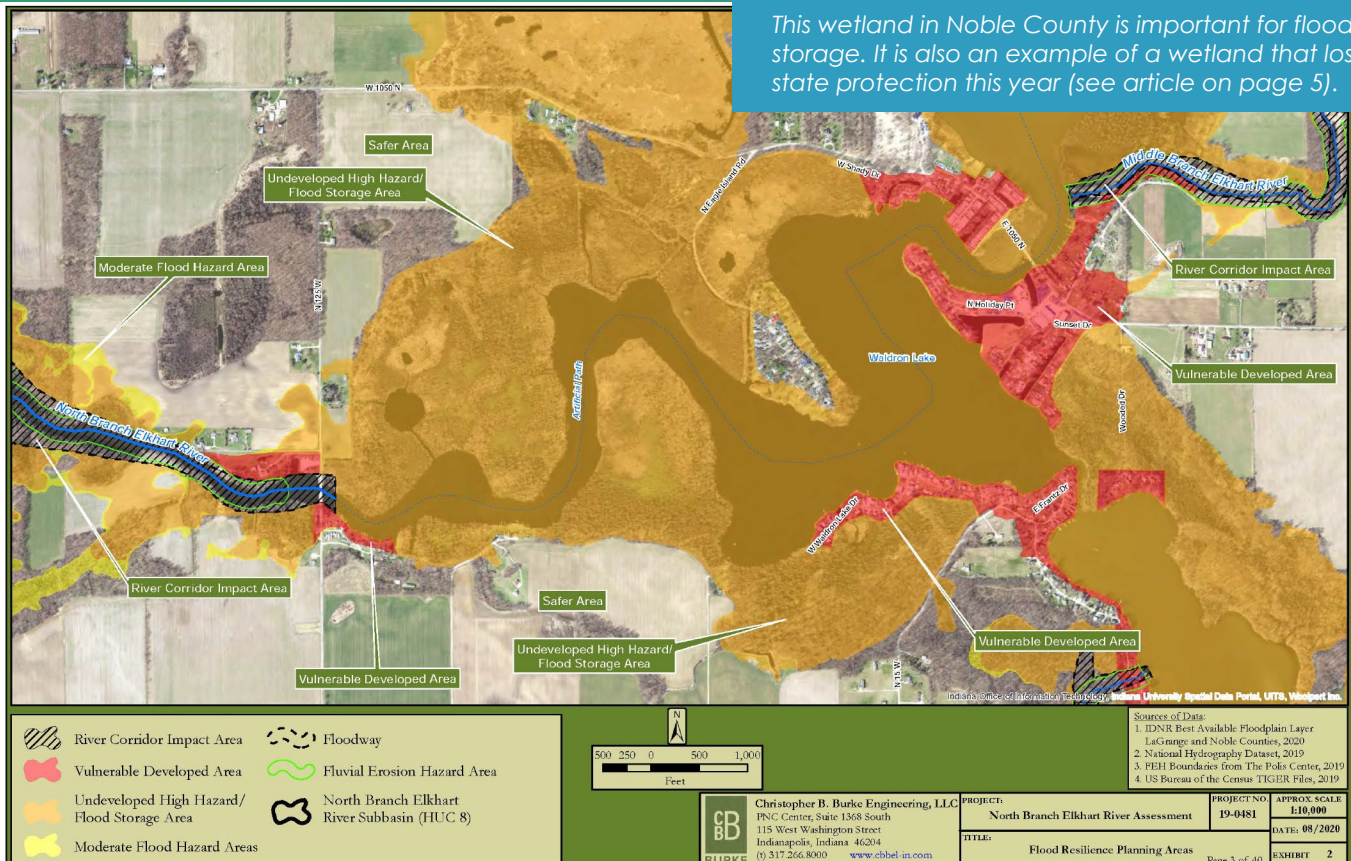
The Commission supported the development of a flood risk management plan for the North Branch of the Elkhart River, which was completed in October 2020. The plan identified six distinct flood resilience planning areas and provided recommended strategies for each geographic area to reduce flood damages, shorten recovery time after flooding, and promote development in the areas that are not vulnerable to flooding. The flood risk management plan recommends working with each watershed community separately to identify strategies that are suitable for implementation in their community. The Commission engaged a consultant in 2021 to facilitate this process in Noble County as a pilot

community. A Flood Resilience Planning Team has been established consisting of Noble County officials, and a series of meetings are being held to identify and prioritize appropriate strategies for each of the six distinct planning areas. If the process leads to the implementation of new flood resilience strategies, and/or improves the utilization of existing strategies in Noble County it could be replicated in other watershed communities.

Noble County officials are working to identify suitable strategies for each planning area mapped in the flood risk management plan.



This wetland in Noble County is important for floodwater storage. It is also an example of a wetland that lost its state protection this year (see article on page 5).



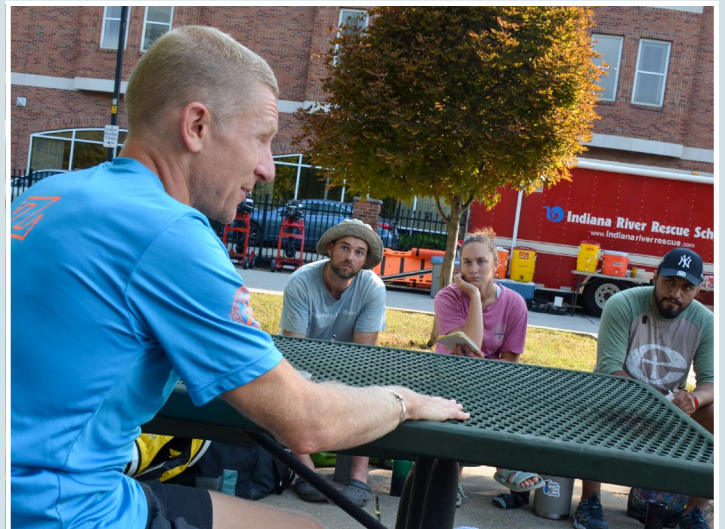
Outreach & Education

The Commission was created to provide a forum for the discussion, study and evaluation of water resource issues. Developing watershed awareness among our members and partners is critical to establishing a healthy forum. The Commission supports outreach that increases the understanding of connections between land use, drainage, water quality and flooding. In addition to the Symposium and presentations at quarterly meetings, the following watershed education efforts were provided in 2021:

- Information and interviews for St. Joseph River documentary and NBC news program on water infrastructure
- Support and technical assistance at Drainage Board meetings in LaGrange, Steuben, Noble, St. Joseph and Kosciusko counties
- Participation in panel discussion at the Indiana Water Summit
- Watershed presentations for the Elkhart County Indiana Master Naturalist Program, Steuben County MS4 Workshop, IDEM Lake Michigan Webinar, USDA tour for legislators, Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi, STEM camp for elementary school girls, Good Shepherd Montessori School, Holy Cross College, University of Notre Dame, Berrien Conservation District, Michigan Lakes & Streams Association, Merry Lea Agroecology and Sustainability Leadership classes, and Mishawaka Lions Club.



Commission Chair, Daragh Deegan, speaks to Goshen College students about the impact of dam removal on the health of the Elkhart River.



Commission Director, Matt Meersman, discusses watershed management with students and staff from the Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center.



Matt and Daragh providing a fish sampling demonstration and hands-on activity for students of the Good Shepherd Montessori School.

Wetland Advocacy

One of the statutory powers of the Commission (IC 14-30-3-19) is to develop positions on major water resource issues and serve as an advocate of the basin's interests before federal, state and local government agencies. Commission members have long recognized and promoted the value of wetlands and the ecosystem functions they provide, which include flood water storage and nutrient removal. Wetlands emerged as a hot topic during the 2021 session of the Indiana General Assembly with the introduction of Senate Bill 389, which significantly reduced protections for Indiana's remaining wetlands. Leading up to the bill's eventual passage, Commission staff worked with several legislators to reduce the potential harm of the bill. This work included phone

calls, letters, testimony and suggested amendments. While the passage of the bill was a major disappointment to many of the Commission's members and partners, it did result in the creation of a 13 member Indiana Wetlands Task Force, of which the Commission is a member. The mission of the task force is to develop recommendations for better state wetland regulation, which includes reducing the burden of the regulatory process and creating incentives for wetland avoidance and preservation during development.



Senator Susan Glick of LaGrange, opposed the bill saying it would destroy protections that help Hoosiers

FAQ's

What is the St. Joseph River Basin?

The St. Joseph River Basin, or watershed, is the area of land that drains to the St. Joseph River of Lake Michigan. It includes 7 counties in northern Indiana and 8 counties in southwest Michigan.

Is Michigan included in the Commission?

Although funding and governance come solely from the Indiana side of the basin, the Commission is authorized to collaborate with state and local officials in Michigan to fulfill our purpose.

How is the agency funded?

The Commission currently receives about \$100K annually from the State of Indiana. Local government members contribute a total of approximately \$60K annually to fund basic operations. Grants and special project income make up the remainder of annual revenue.

Who do you serve?

Although the Commission provides some education and resources for the general public, our target audience is local government officials, staff and partners involved in land and water management.

Where is the Commission located?

The Commission is currently headquartered in the Michiana Area Council of Governments offices in South Bend, Indiana. An ongoing partnership between the two entities exists through a cooperative agreement.

MEETINGS



Stakeholder meetings are regularly organized by the Commission to solicit input on watershed planning and implementation projects.

Quarterly

The St. Joseph River Basin Commission meets quarterly at 10:00 a.m. on the first Thursday of March, June, September and December. In addition to conducting regular business, these meetings provide opportunities for members to share information about water related projects and issues. The business meeting is often followed by a short presentation on a project or initiative in the basin.

2022 Meeting Schedule

March 3
June 2
September 1
December 1

Symposium

The 21st annual Symposium was held on May 14th, 2021. The Symposium brings decision makers and water managers from the Indiana and Michigan portions of the basin together each year. Although virtual this year, the event focused on creating connections in the watershed.

Formal presentations were provided by Marcy Hamilton of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, and Daragh Deegan, from the City of Elkhart. Both presentations highlighted dam removal projects in the basin, one in Michigan and one in Indiana. Marcy spoke about dam removal on the Dowagiac River, and future plans to reconnect the river to its floodplain upstream. Daragh talked about the positive effects of dam removal on fish communities. Following the removal of the Elkhart dam in 2020, there has been an increase in fish diversity above the old dam site.

Both presentations showcased the positive outcomes that are possible when connections are created.

2021 Members

ELKHART COUNTY

Commissioner Brad Rogers
Proxy Frank Lucchese

Health Officer Bethany Wait, D.O.
Proxy Bill Hartsuff

Surveyor Philip Barker
Proxy Steve Schweisberger

Soil & Water Conservation District
Jim Hess

City of Elkhart
Mayor Rod Roberson
Proxy Daragh Deegan

KOSCIUSKO COUNTY

Commissioner Cary Groninger
Proxy Jon Roberts

Health Officer William Remington, M.D.
Proxy Robert Weaver

Surveyor Michael Kissinger
Proxy Jim Moyer

Soil & Water Conservation District
Jewel Wise

Town of Syracuse
Council President Larry Siegel

LAGRANGE COUNTY

Commissioner Peter Cook
Proxy Martin Franke

Health Officer Tony Pechin, M.D.
Proxy Jarod Nisley

Surveyor Zach Holsinger
Proxy Steven Vaughn

Soil & Water Conservation District
Dona Hunter

Town of LaGrange
Council President Ray Hoover
Proxy Diane Cameron

NOBLE COUNTY

Commissioner Brad Rogers
Proxy Frank Lucchese

Health Officer Terry Gaff, M.D.
Proxy Jason Pippenger

Surveyor Randy Sexton

Soil & Water Conservation District
Stacey McGinnis

City of Kendallville
Mayor SuzAnne Handshoe
Proxy Sue McGee

ST. JOSEPH COUNTY

Commissioner Derek Dieter

Health Officer Robert Einterz, M.D.
Proxy Mark Espich

Surveyor John McNamara
Proxy John Law

Soil & Water Conservation District
Sarah Longenecker

City of Mishawaka
Mayor David Wood
Proxy Adam Bowden

City of South Bend
Mayor James Mueller
Proxy Kieran Fahey

STEBUEN COUNTY

Commissioner Lynne Leichty

Health Officer Ted Crisman, M.D.
Proxy Alicia Walsh

Surveyor Mike Ruff

Soil & Water Conservation District
Janel Meyer

City of Angola
Mayor Dick Hickman
Proxy Kris Thomas

INDIANA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Director Daniel Bortner
Proxy Rod Edgell

Staff

Matt Meersman, Director
Kate Barrett, Aquatic Ecologist