

ST Paper donates \$140k to Oconto County for conservationist to reduce nutrient runoff

OCONTO — An Oconto County paper company is helping the county fund a position that will hopefully take a closer look at pollution affecting area waterways.

"We have two staffers, currently, everyone thinks we just work with farmers," explained Ken Dolata, the county's land conservation department head, "but we also have 370 lakes we work with, over 500 miles of named streams, wildlife and fish habitats, wetland restoration, invasive species."

Dolata says the \$140,000 donation by Oconto Falls-based ST Paper will fund a conservation planner for two years, allowing staff to address the issue of soil erosion and phosphorous runoff. Three rivers have been listed as having higher-than allowable phosphorous levels.

"Little Suamico, Pensaukee and the Little River - which empties into the Oconto River."

Dolata says farms aren't the only cause or source of the soil erosion or phosphorous runoff, but he says that the issues do start upstream, in the watershed and the county's 200,000-plus acres of farmland and more than 900 farms are the largest sources.

"It'll be looking all the stuff, it shouldn't be said just farmers," said Dolata, "but we will focus on the areas with the largest agricultural impact."

County agriculture officials with the UW Extension say nutrient management plans have been in place for nearly 20 years, but farmers are usually open to improving those practices.

"Most farms are willing to do things for the simple reason that it is usually economically a good thing for them," explained Scott Reuss, the agriculture and horticulture agent with Marinette County's UW Extension, who also serves Oconto County.

ST Paper representatives, county officials and Congressman Reid Ribble championed the announcement of the funds Friday morning in the county board chambers.

"And we thought that this was the right project for Northeastern Wisconsin," said Bill Broydrick, a Washington, D.C.-based lobbyist for the company. Broydrick said the company has a commitment to the county and state after it received \$30 million in tax credits from the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority for use in upgrading its Oconto Falls mill.

"The idea that there are algae blooms in the Green Bay is just unacceptable to all of us. Everyone one of us in this region."

Reducing algae blooms that affect much of the area's waterways during the summer months has been an objective of Ribble's for some time. I tagged along with him late this summer as NEW Water employees tested the bay's water quality and phosphorous levels.

"Having more conservationists, working with our local dairy farmers," said Ribble, "helping them learn about best practices, helping them learn the economics of best practices related to keeping those nutrients on the field."

And out of the water.

Dolata hopes that in the coming years the third field position can be made permanent through the county's normal budget process.