

ST Paper steps up to protect Green Bay water

An Oconto Falls paper company announced Friday it will cover the cost of a land conservation employee to work with Oconto County farmers to reduce runoff into Green Bay.

The \$140,000 donation by ST Paper was praised by Rep. Reid Ribble, who in 2014 launched a "Save the Bay" effort to protect it from fish kills and dead zones.

Land conservationists in northeast Wisconsin have said "they need more boots on the ground" in order to make progress in reducing fertilizer-tainted run-off.

"They've got great relationships with farmers, large and small, but they don't have enough of them to begin to work with them to create buffer zones, provide cover crops and (promote) best practices that would help retain that soil so it never ends up in the bay in the first place," Ribble said.

However, the county has only two conservation technicians whose time is divided between soil conservation and working to improve fish and wildlife habitation.

Addressing the problem has been difficult, said Ken Dolata, head of the Oconto County Land Conservation Department. That's because the county has 900 farms and more than 200,000 acres of crop land, in county that's 100 miles long from north to south.

The position will be a conservation planner, similar to a technician but without the engineering qualification. The planner will assist implementing the county's soil, land and water resource management plans and animal waste ordinance.

"To even get two years' worth of staff time, we can have them focus" on soil practices such as conservation tillage, cover crops and nutrient management, he said.

Dennis Kroll of Pulaski, a member of the Oconto County Board and chairman of the Land Conservation Committee, said they hope to have the position filled in April.

"It will be a big plus for us," Kroll said. "We'll have someone out there giving education in all the different practices needed. We were very short on staff. This will come in handy."

The EPA has listed all three rivers in the county (Oconto, Pensaukee and Little Suamico) that flow into the bay as having nutrients — primarily phosphorus — above tolerable levels.

That's been the cause of increasing numbers of algae blooms, Ribble said.

Whether it's from a farm or a community, he added, the impact on the water is the same.

"It gets into the bay, rivers, or Lake Winnebago or other bodies," Ribble said. "Those nutrients are basically fertilizer that cause the algae to bloom, and ultimately you get these hypoxic zones where the fish begin to die and nothing can live there."

Sharad Tak, the CEO of ST Paper, was not able to attend the announcement at the Oconto County Courthouse. ST Paper, which employs 90 people producing commercial tissue and napkin stock, has made numerous contributions to community organizations and local governments since Tak took over the ailing paper mill in 2007.

Vice president Bill Culek said the donation was an opportunity for the company to be proactive and involved in the community.

"A lot of times, when you hear about paper mills and the environment, it isn't always positive coverage," Culek said. "This is a chance for us to be out in front of something that's very positive and impactful."

Culek thanked Ribble for his suggestion that company help address reducing point-source pollution and run-off.

"For farmers, this conservation position can help these farmers find good ways to take better care of their land, take better care of the rivers and the bay of Green Bay, and do it without costing them money," Culek said. "It's a win-win, really."

Ribble said he was thrilled by the donation, which he said was significant step toward improving the quality of life in northeast Wisconsin.

"Really, when it comes to issues of the environment, I don't know a single person — Republican or Democrat, Libertarian, whatever political persuasion you are — that doesn't want their children or grandchildren to breathe clean air and drink clean water and enjoy our forest, lakes and streams."