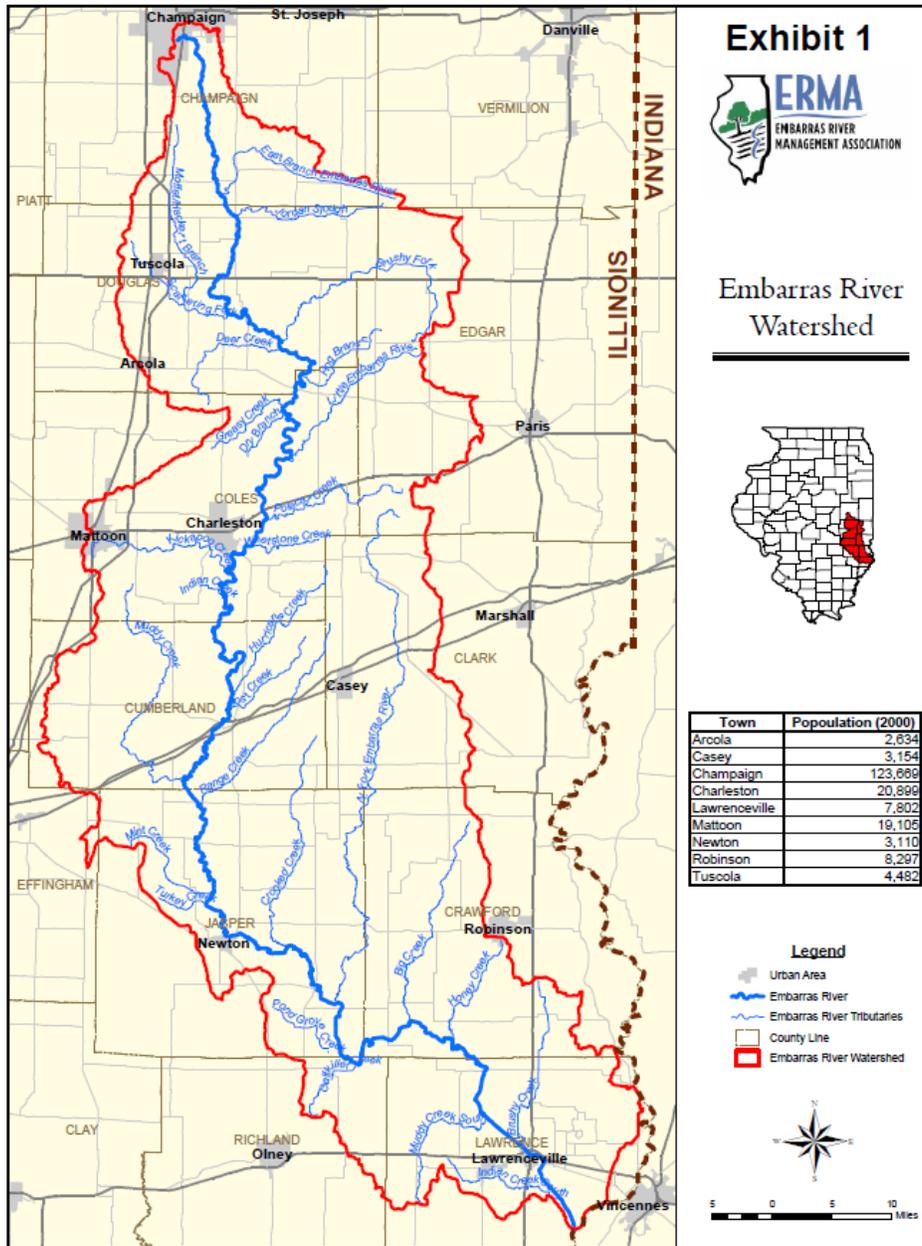


Embarras Watershed Planning Meetings Feedback and Outlook Report – January 2020



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Introduction

In January 2020, the Illinois Farm Bureau (IFB), ten County Farm Bureaus, Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) and the University of Illinois Extension hosted a series of nine watershed planning meetings across the Embarras River Watershed (ERW). These planning meetings gave farmers and landowners the opportunity to share their concerns and interests across the entire watershed and allowed organizers to collect important information as the group continues their work in updating the 2011 Embarras River Watershed Management Plan. This report will provide background information on previous and current watershed update efforts, as well as identifying high level takeaways from each meeting within the watershed.

Background – Why do we need watershed plans?

The Embarras River Watershed (ERW) was identified in the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy as a priority watershed for reducing phosphorus losses. The NLRS guides state efforts to improve water quality in all sectors and capacities within the state. The ERW is one of the state's most critical watersheds in terms of phosphorus losses. One of the most impactful ways to address nutrient loss within watersheds is to develop a **watershed plan**.

A watershed plan includes a comprehensive summary of the overall condition of a watershed and the protected waters that may be impacted by sources of pollutants, as well as provides a framework for effectively and efficiently restoring water quality in impaired waters. Further, watershed plans give direction to strategic implementation of conservation practices within a watershed in order to meet water quality goals. Watershed plans have a life of 10 years, meaning the 2011 Embarras River Management Plan will expire in 2021. Without a watershed plan in place, stakeholders within the watershed have a decreased chance of receiving funding from certain state and federal programs for implementing conservation practices. All implementation of conservation practices is voluntary. Involving local stakeholders in the planning process is critical to the success of the watershed plan.

In Summer 2019, stakeholders across the ERW worked together to apply for a Section 319 Nonpoint Source Pollution Grant through the IEPA, with significant support from Jeff Boeckler (*Northwater Consulting*), Lauren Spaniol (*Coles County SWCD*) and Jennifer Woodyard (*U of I Extension*). Stakeholders across the watershed proved once again that they are committed to protecting the Embarras River by fundraising over 40% of the cost to update the watershed plan, a requirement set forth by the IEPA. While waiting to hear from IEPA on the status of the grant application, stakeholders across the watershed gathered to share their feedback on what the 2021 Embarras River Watershed Management Plan should include. With the help of a Nutrient Stewardship

Grant from the Illinois Farm Bureau, ten County Farm Bureaus and Soil and Water Conservation Districts, with University of Illinois Extension, hosted nine Watershed Planning Meetings across the watershed. These meetings, though targeted to farmers, attracted individuals from many backgrounds, including landowners, elected officials, conservation enthusiasts, and others. The subsequent sections of this report provide summaries of these nine meetings, including general information about the meetings and audience members, as well as their concerns and interests in implementing conservation practices in the watershed.

Richland and Lawrence Counties - January 7, 2020

The watershed planning meetings kicked off with a breakfast meeting hosted by Richland County Farm Bureau (*Kenzie Zwilling, Manager*), Richland County SWCD (*Loleta Yonaka, Resource Conservationist*), Lawrence County Farm Bureau (*Paige Langenhorst, Manager*), and Lawrence County SWCD (*Kristi Cooley, Resource Conservationist*). The audience for this meeting was composed of 45 individuals, primarily farmers from the counties.

Members of the audience started the meeting by discussing several of their issues across the watershed. Many of the farmers expressed major **erosion** issues, including streambank erosion and measurable sedimentation in streams and fields. One farmer expressed that he measured 4-5 feet of sedimentation in one location on his farm, a sentiment that many related to. Farmers who had **sedimentation** issues also found themselves questioning what they could do with mass volumes of sand and sediment, indicating that they were often met with challenges when trying to permanently remove sediment from their fields. Another area of concern for several members of this group centered around their experiences with **cover crops**. Some of the issues with cover crops included: challenges with getting them established, keeping them under control, accessing the



Audience members at the Richland and Lawrence watershed planning meeting shared their Embarras Watershed experiences, concerns, and interests with Jennifer Woodyard (U of I Extension) and Jeff Boeckler (Northwater Consulting).

right products for their fields, and major concerns about the costs and benefits of adding cover crops to their rotations.

For the watershed plan update, farmers had several interests and ideas for practices that should be included. Farmers in the audience indicated that there were fairly extensive **terraces** throughout the counties but would be interested in seeing **cost-share** or **technical support** for upgrading existing terraces, in addition to re-tiling where it makes sense. While many had previously expressed several concerns with cover crops, they also indicated that they would like to see more local education and economic data on cover crops. The group also expressed a lot of interest in developing **education and outreach** for the public. Many farmers felt it was important to educate the non-farming, general public on ‘what’s happening on the farm,’ indicating that their non-farming neighbors (including their distant neighbors in Chicago and Springfield) often don’t realize the need or benefit of conservation practices. In the words of one farmer, “How can we get funding if people representing us don’t even know what we are doing or even care?”

Crawford County – January 7, 2020

To round out the first day of planning meetings, Crawford County Farm Bureau (*Kourtney Mellendorf, Manager*) and Crawford County SWCD (*Lorri Shaw, Administrative Coordinator*) hosted approximately 30 farmers at the Crawford County Forest Preserve.

Like the attendees at the Richland and Lawrence meeting, members of this audience expressed concerns with **sedimentation** and **erosion**, as well as with **log jams** and



Crawford County farmers shared their concerns and interests with Jennifer Woodyard, including repeatedly voicing the need for more financial support within the watershed.

emerging **gulleys** as a result of rapidly moving water. Many individuals were also concerned with the overall **cost**, **practicality**, and **time** associated with implementing conservation practices. Many also shared their concerns about getting sufficient **funding** to implement conservation practices in Southern Illinois.

Farmers in this audience indicated that their fields were **tiled**, which they clarified worked better for them than terraces because of the differing soil types in Crawford County. Audience members also shared that many fields across the county had **filter strips** and that there was not a

strong desire to add more. Many farmers in the audience were interested in adding **Water and Sediment Control Basins (WASCOBs)** and in introducing more subsurface irrigation and ponds within the county – in the words of one member “everyone wants a pond.” Several audience members also expressed the need for local, on-going **research** on conservation practices, including economic data from the region. Similar again to the Richland and Lawrence County audience, many attendees from Crawford County wanted to see more **funding** for conservation programs in Southern Illinois, specifically requesting **education and outreach** for landowners and the general public on existing conservation efforts and how they could get involved, as well as education and outreach for farmers to better understand existing programs and funding opportunities for implementing conservation practices.

Champaign County – January 16, 2020

On January 16th, the Champaign County Farm Bureau (*Brad Uken, Manager*) and Champaign County SWCD (*Erin Bush, Resource Conservationist*) hosted the third Embarras Watershed Planning Meeting. Roughly 20 individuals attended this meeting, with the majority of the audience being composed of farmers or other agriculture professionals.

Members of this group astutely identified the Villa Grove main channel as a key area of concern for them. Many felt that although the Embarras River was backing up in several places, it was especially poor in this area. This conversation drew out additional concerns about **regulatory restrictions** on main channel work, namely **streambank stabilization**. Many were also troubled by their urban neighbors, noting several instances of local lakes and wastewater treatment facilities that they felt were contributing to nutrient loss at a significant rate. Similar to feedback from previous participants, many members of the Champaign County audience expressed concerns about **cover crops**, including the cost, timing, and possible risks on future crop yields.



Champaign County farmers shared their concerns and interests for the watershed plan, including the need for improved education and outreach.

Many farmers in this audience indicated that they are using **Variable Rate Technology (VRT)** to apply fertilizers but believed there should be more farmers using these practices throughout the county to help make more significant changes. To help better address nutrient loss, some audience members identified a need for **research** on

natural baseline nutrient losses. Several also expressed interest in **cost-share** programs or initiatives to help off-set the cost of strip-till and other conservation equipment. This group also identified several areas for increased or improved **education and outreach**, including: best management practices for fertilizer application, specialized soil education to help eliminate erosion, managing cover crops, information on existing cost-share programs, and non-farmer landowner education and outreach of conservation practices.

Coles County – January 23, 2020

Coles County Watershed Planning Meeting attendees kicked off the first meeting on January 23 with a rainy-day breakfast at the Coles County Farm Bureau (*Tonya Eich, Manager*) in collaboration with the Coles County SWCD (*Lauren Spaniol, Research Conservationist*). The meeting was comprised of 17 individuals, with a roughly even split between farmers and non-farming landowners or members of local conservation organizations.



Jeff Boeckler shares some of the steps he will take as he updates the Embarras River Watershed Plan, including collecting data about the river and nutrient runoff.

Of course, **flooding** was once again identified as a primary concern within the watershed, including additional troubles with **water surges**. Many members of this group indicated that they had **ponds** to store water, but cited concerns that existing ponds are not working properly and that they had issues finding someone to design new ponds. Several individuals cited concerns with their **neighbors**, with most of the group being able to identify several landowners and farmers that they argue refuse to implement conservation practices for a variety of reasons. While many farmers in the audience indicated a significant amount of **field tiles** and **terraces** throughout the county, there was some concern

that the sheer amount of tiling might be negatively impacting the rising river.

Audience members expressed a variety of interests they would like to see addressed in the watershed plan to help address their concerns. To start, a few individuals suggested working on a smaller watershed scale within the Embarras watershed in order to more accurately encompass the vast soil differences within the county. Many also supported the addition of various **edge of field practices**, such as woodchip bioreactors and saturated buffers, across the county, as well as in field practices such as **filter strips** and additional **grass waterways**. In addition, several farmers were interested in seeing

more **cost-share** for **cover crops** and conservation equipment rentals, as well as increased funding for **soil testing** and **data collection**.

Edgar County – January 23, 2020

Edgar County Farm Bureau (*Wyatt Williamson, Manager*) and Edgar County SWCD (*Tara Hopkins, Resource Conservationist*) hosted a group of 14 actively engaged farmers and agriculture professionals, marking the fifth of nine watershed planning meetings.

Like their fellow farmers across the watershed, this group also expressed concerns for accessing funds for conservation practices. Many supported the effort to request 319 funds, with a few even citing positive 319 experiences in the past but were concerned that there wasn't enough **financial support** in East Central Illinois to make effective change within the watershed. Additionally, several members of this group indicated that even when they were ready to implement a conservation practice, they often struggled to find **contractors** to design and install them. Anecdotally, some felt that there are limited contractors in the area and fewer who stayed.

To address their conservation concerns, farmers in attendance had already implemented extensive **waterways, terraces, and tiling** systems throughout the county, but expressed the need for **funding** for repairs. **Bank stabilization** and conservation practices that account for **surges** were key interests that the group would like to see addressed in the watershed plan. Many in the group were also interested in **cover crops** and cover crop **education and outreach**. Specifically, members of the audience indicated that they wanted to receive specialized, one-on-one **mentoring** on chemical application and cover crops for individual fields, including strong interests for more farmer-led presentations.

Douglas County – January 23, 2020

Roughly 30 individuals attended the sixth Embarras Watershed Planning Meeting, held at the Douglas County Ag Center (*Tyler Harvey, Farm Bureau Manager; Devon McCumber, SWCD Resource Conservationist*). As soon as this meeting started, farmers led the conversation on their concerns, conservation practices, and future interests within the watershed.

Numerous members of this audience expressed that they were already consistently using **cover crops** on their farms as a way to address nutrient loss. Several noted they were currently implementing cover crops without **cost-share** assistance, though cost-share helped them in initial years of adoption. Many felt continued cost-share

assistance would be a great asset to those who have not yet adopted or tried cover crops. Additionally, most farmers in the group indicated that they had some combination of **terraces, tiles** and **WASCOBs** in their fields. Many individuals also expressed that they were practicing **low** or **no-till** on their farms, as well as **spring-only fertilizer application**. Many members of this group raised specific concerns with capturing nutrients before they hit **drainage ditches**. Several felt that the only way to address these concerns would be to plant more acres of cover crops across the county, however, many indicated that their **neighbors** within and outside of the county may not be as willing to implement this conservation practice.

Several individuals expressed concerns with **gaps in data** and the implications this could have on farmers. For example, some indicated a lack of understanding in yearly fluctuating nutrient levels, long-term changes in nutrient levels, and effects of nutrient loss besides Nitrogen and Phosphorus in both streams and soils. To address this concern, several expressed the need for more **research** focused on numerous aspects of conservation and increased **funding** for organizations like the Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council (NREC).



Farmers led the conversation at Douglas County on Jan. 23, covering topics such as research, cover crops, and spring fertilizer application.

Members of this audience expressed support for incorporating more acres of cover crops throughout the watershed within the watershed plan. Many indicated that they would also like to see more cover crop **technical assistance**, especially in picking seed mixes that are appropriate for individual fields, for example. Several members of the group expressed interest in developing a “**cover crop support group**” to support individuals who continue to use cover crops after conventional cost-share opportunities expire.

Jasper County – January 30, 2020

To begin the final day of Watershed Planning Meetings, the Jasper County Farm Bureau (*Tony Trimble, Manager*) and Jasper County SWCD (*Brad Tarr, Resource Conservationist*) hosted the seventh meeting, which included an audience of 30 members. Most attendees were farmers, but many also played various roles in the agriculture industry.

Flooding and **fast-moving water** were primary concerns for farmers in Jasper County, as well as **top-soil erosion**. For several attendees, **cover crops** were also an area of concern, primarily in terms of cost and return, maintenance, timing, and reliability of cover crops. Additionally, many attendees raised concerns about city and district **roads**, including major washouts and questions about the nutrient run-off coming from roads.

In order to address their concerns within the watershed, a few were using some **cover crops**, and most had varying **grass waterways**. Some members of the audience also had **retention ponds** to help manage water storage concerns. In the updated watershed plan, farmers indicated that they wanted to see more **research on legacy nutrients**, in order to better understand natural nutrient loss and to gauge how farm practices contribute to overall losses. Further, the group expressed interest in supporting regular clearing of **log jams**, as well as **dredging** parts of the river.



After breakfast, Jasper County farmers were ready to engage in watershed planning efforts. They shared their problems within the watershed, as well as the practices they would like to see in the updated plan.

Cumberland County – January 30, 2020

The Cumberland County Farm Bureau (*Sarah Walk, Manager*) and Cumberland County SWCD (*Randy Hurt, Resource Conservationist; Judy Meislahn, Administrative Coordinator*). hosted a lunchtime meeting on January 30. The audience for this meeting was composed of 30 individuals, with a majority being farmers or agriculture professionals, as well as landowners, contractors, and local Soil and Water board members.

Members of the group cited many water-related concerns, such as **gulleys**, stream **washout**, **sedimentation**, **streambank erosion**, **log jams**, and **sheet and rill erosion**. Additionally, the practicality and economics of **cover crops** were a concern for some farmers in the audience, who did indicate that they would be more interested in adding cover crops to their rotations if they had access to local, individualized **economic** and **technical guidance**. For some, deciphering whether they were allowed to repair or install their own conservation practices, or whether they had to involve regulatory agencies was another area of concern.



Randy Hurt leads audience participation, focusing on some of the local conservation practices in Cumberland County.

Farmers in this audience either currently employed or were interested in a variety of conservation practices to address their concerns. By way of raising hands, approximately 50 percent of the audience indicated that they had acres enrolled in some sort of **CRP** or other conservation program. Several were also currently planting **cover crops**, including winter wheat, or had tried them in the past and were interested in trying to utilize them again. Other interests included consistent **log jam** removal, in addition to **cost share** for several projects, such as: **ditch checks**, long-term cover crop programs, **terraces**, **dry dams**, road and ditch repair, as well as many others.

Clark County – January 30

The final Embarras River Watershed Planning Meeting was held at the Clark County Farm Bureau (*Tony Trimble, Manager*) with the Clark County SWCD (*Jim Nestleroad, Resource Conservationist*). The audience was composed of 20 attendees, with over half having some sort of farming or agriculture-related background.

Attendees expressed several concerns related to the watershed, including issues with **sheet and rill erosion** and **soil compaction**. For those experiencing these issues, many felt that erosion and compaction were the most prominent near and along the North Fork Embarras River. Many farmers in the audience indicated issues with **absentee landowners** along the river, especially with hunters who were skeptical to implement conservation practices that may interfere with hunting. Additionally, several attendees were concerned that their existing conservation practices had maintenance or functional issues, such as filter strips filling and then dumping water elsewhere.

Audience members identified several possible interests to include in the updated watershed plan. A few farmers indicated that they were consistently planting **cover crops** on their fields, and several agreed that they would likely plant cover crops if more long-term **cost share** programs existed. Most attendees expressed interest in support for **maintenance** of existence conservation practices across the county, including having parts of the **river dredged**. Finally, many farmers in the audience supported new approaches to **regional marketing campaigns**, particularly ones that could use videos from local farmers to share conservation practices “in action.”

Next Steps and Special Thanks

The stakeholders responsible for submitting the IEPA Section 319 grant expect to be notified by late spring 2020 if the grant was successfully funded. If the application is funded, the 2021 Embarras River Management Plan will incorporate the significant feedback from these planning meetings.

First, many thanks go out to all of the stakeholders that helped to apply and fundraise for the Section 319 grant, including: Jeff Boeckler (Northwater Consulting), Jennifer Woodyard (U of I Extension), Lauren Spaniol (Coles County Soil and Water Conservation District), local SWCDs, County Farm Bureaus, the Illinois Farm Bureau, and many private funders.

In addition, a special thank you goes out to the Illinois Farm Bureau for funding the watershed planning meetings, and to IEPA for support of these efforts. Thank you also to the Richland, Lawrence, Crawford, Champaign, Coles, Edgar, Douglas, Jasper, Cumberland and Clark County Farm Bureaus for playing an integral part in promoting and hosting the planning meetings.

Finally, we would like to thank the nearly 190 individuals who attended the watershed planning meetings. Your feedback has been invaluable, and we hope to continue working with you in the Embarras Watershed.