



Clean water projects going the distance

September 2015 Snapshots



Cook County's Poplar River is an important natural resource. The Poplar River watershed is high-profile, containing a vital trout fishery, recreation areas, and other natural areas that make it an economic engine for the North Shore. The river also drains directly into Lake Superior.

To protect Lake Superior, water quality standards for the streams and rivers entering it are exceptionally stringent. Erosion along the Poplar was a problem, and in 2004 it was listed as impaired for excess silt and clay in the water. Studies indicated that as much as 65% of the sediment causing the impairment came from a massive erosion site – dubbed the “Megaslump” by local residents – that occurred where the river makes a sharp bend. The slope was constantly being eroded at this site, and the bank continued to slough into the river.



Before the Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment provided constitutionally-dedicated funding for natural resource protection, local governments looked to the Clean Water Legacy Act. Enacted in 2006, it put the framework in place for future legislative funding. An erosion control project to begin tackling the Megaslump was one of the first batch of Clean Water Legacy projects funded in 2007.



The top picture shows the slump before any conservation practices were implemented. Pictured bottom is the same area, after installation.

A series of rock veins were installed that moved the force of the current away from the bank and provided a bench to catch soil eroding from the bank. Although some vegetation was installed on the bank, the slope and silty clay soils made that difficult. The plan was to stabilize the toe of the slope and let natural revegetation proceed.

Several other projects were installed as part of that project including gully stabilizations, one of which entered the river just upstream of the Megaslump, and replacing an undersized culvert. Water quality measurements taken in the years following the installation of these projects and several others initiated by the Cook Soil and Water Conservation District and the Poplar River Management Board indicate that the sediment load has been reduced by at least 35%.

Work in the Poplar River Watershed has accelerated thanks to a BWSR-funded January Clean Water Fund Targeted Watershed Demonstration Program grant to the Cook Soil and Water Conservation District. Water Quality modeling gives a strong indication that the Poplar River may reach water quality standards after those projects are installed. That's good news for the Poplar River, residents of the watershed and the critters that depend on quality stream habitat.