

## County Governments Protecting the Environment

April 22-28 was National County Government Week and the theme for this year's celebration was "Protecting the Environment." Each year, the Department of Environmental Quality works with many county government departments all across Michigan to partner our efforts towards preserving and protecting their community's natural resources.

Scientists estimate that over 4.5 billion tons of sediment pollutes the rivers and lakes of the United States each year. This is the equivalent to 25,000 football fields, 100-feet high, and the damage from erosion and sedimentation affects nearly every citizen. Potential impacts from soil erosion and sedimentation to our lakes and streams include loss of topsoil; clogged ditches, culverts, and storm sewers that may increase flooding and certainly increase maintenance costs; muddy or turbid lakes and streams; damage to plant and animal life; filled in ponds, lakes, and reservoirs; damage to aquatic habitats; and reduced recreational value and use.

Each of the 83 counties in Michigan have developed a Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control Program to minimize erosion from construction sites and other earth change activities in an effort to address this problem. These programs, at a minimum, require landowners to obtain permits if they conduct earth changes over an acre in size or within 500 feet of a lake or stream. They also require landowners to plan for and implement control measures to minimize erosion and sedimentation to off-site properties and to waters of the state. In addition to the countywide programs, many county agencies, like drain commissions and road commissions, have voluntarily become Authorized Public Agencies (APA). As APAs, these agencies are required to develop and implement a program for their own work projects in lieu of obtaining permits. The DEQ works closely with these agencies in an oversight role and can attest to the great strides they have made to reduce erosion from construction sites across the state.

In 1987, Congress amended the federal Clean Water Act to implement a national storm water program, in part, because of growing concern over the health of our nation's waters. Assessments indicated that approximately 40 percent of our nation's rivers, lakes, and estuaries were impaired and not capable of meeting designated uses. This national storm water program requires municipalities meeting certain population criteria to implement programs to reduce or eliminate pollutants from storm water. Currently, 23 counties are developing storm water management plans to reduce pollution entering our lakes and streams from storm sewers, road ditches, and county drains.

Michigan's counties also spearhead many local watershed efforts throughout the state. Currently, over 20 county agencies, such as county conservation districts, are holding DEQ-administered watershed grants from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. On average, through the efforts of county agencies, over \$3 million in grant funds are leveraged annually for watershed protection and improvement.

In order to ensure that our natural resources are viable for future generations, each of us must do our part. County government continues to play a key role in protecting the environment. We encourage you to contact your county government to find out more about what they are doing to protect water quality and how you can get involved.



Jon Eggen, St. Joseph County Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control Agent, evaluates sedimentation in creek.