

6-18-2003

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Recommended Citation

University Marketing and Communications, "06/18/2003 - Embarras Ecosystems.pdf" (2003). 2003. 201.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/press_releases_2003/201

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NEWS

Contact: Vicki Woodard (csvns@eiu.edu)
Melinda Matthews (csmem2@eiu.edu)
217-581-7650
217-581-8444 (fax)

Office of Media Relations
600 Lincoln Avenue
Room 2142 Old Main
Charleston, IL 61920-3099
(www.eiu.edu/~pubaff/omr.htm)

03-112

June 18, 2003

For Immediate Release:

FARMERS, CONSERVATIONISTS JOIN EFFORTS TO PRESERVE EMBARRAS ECOSYSTEMS

CHARLESTON – When Vince Gutowski drives over one of the bridges spanning the Embarras River in east-central Illinois and looks at the water below, he knows it runs a little cleaner because of his efforts.

But Gutowski, a faculty member in the Department of Geology/Geography at Eastern Illinois University, is quick to point out that the efforts of the farmers along the river have been just as important in conserving the environment of the river and its watershed.

Gutowski is a member of the board of directors of the Embarras River Management Association, a grassroots agency of farmers and conservationists founded in 1993. ERMA's mission is to preserve the soil and water ecosystems of the Embarras, which rises in Champaign County and flows into the Wabash River at Lawrenceville through a region of the state that is both intensely farmed and highly erodible -- factors that make the Embarras and its watershed one of the most vulnerable river systems in the state.

Earlier this year, Gutowski, who has been associated with ERMA since 1996 and plays a leading role in administration of the organization, assisted in acquiring a \$400,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture grant that will enable ERMA to continue its conservation support. The money will enable the agency to outreach to farmers and riparian landowners to educate them about conservation practices and to cost-share with them to reduce their expenses for implementing those practices.

"The farmers in the watershed are great," said Gutowski, who is an at-large director of ERMA. "The public often hears bad things about farmers and how they contribute to erosion and fertilizers and pesticides in the water, but given the opportunity, they are more than willing to help to clean up the environment."

Gutowski said the Embarras watershed faces multiple environmental challenges. Erosion on hillsides not only washes away soil nutrients, it causes siltation of the river and its tributaries, impacting aquatic habitats. Removal of streamside trees causes banks to cave in, streambeds to shift and fragments woodland habitat to the detriment of wildlife. Pesticides and fertilizer runoff degrades water quality for both people and wildlife. Whole trees washing into the riverbed clog the stream and cause flooding and further erosion.

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ERMA has promoted a number of conservation practices to combat such problems, Gutowski said. These include monitoring water quality, streamside tree plantings to stabilize banks and counter woodland fragmentation, grass filter strips to keep soil from washing into the river and to absorb nitrogen and fertilizer runoff, and efforts to educate farmers about other soil conservation practices. The agency also developed a comprehensive watershed management plan and acts as a go-between for stakeholders and government agencies.

“Seventy-eight percent of the land surface in the watershed is devoted to agriculture, so most of our efforts have been directed toward farmers,” said Gutowski, “but a lot of pollutants come off urban areas as well. We hope to partner with the cities and reach out to them, too.”

The grant is not the first received by ERMA, nor is Gutowski the only connection between Eastern Illinois University and the agency. The organization received \$300,000 in USDA funding in the 1990s, and that money enabled the agency to hire its first full-time coordinators, Eastern graduate Dan Osterman, and later, EIU alumnus Matt Stafford. Numerous Eastern faculty members and students have contributed over the years, too, by researching grants and making other in-kind contributions. Greg Sherwood is the current coordinator, and Rollie Spaniol is the treasurer.

ERMA and Gutowski also have developed a comprehensive management plan for the Hurricane Creek watershed, which is a tributary to the Embarras, and won Illinois Pilot Water Watershed Program status for the Hurricane Creek watershed in Coles and Cumberland counties. Only three other watersheds in the state of Illinois have received similar designation. That program, likewise aimed at stopping erosion and pollution in a smaller area, has brought more than \$1 million in conservation practice matching state and federal aid to farmers in Hutton Township in Coles County.

Another ERMA project, to build rainfall simulators to demonstrate the effects of falling rain on soil surfaces and the value of crop residue in reducing erosion and nutrient leaching and retaining soil moisture, also recently received federal funding.

The Embarras watershed encompasses 1.5 million acres in a 10-county area of east-central and southeastern Illinois and is home to 130,000 people.

Gutowski said individuals with an interest in ERMA may contact the agency office in Toledo at (217) 849-3762.