



News Column

University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension

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BIG BLUE RIVER

I often ask fifth graders at the Earth Festival and farmers at training meetings, “What is the number one pollutant in the Big Blue River?” Both groups get the answer wrong more often than they get it right. Such is the nature of things we see every day and become complacent about, even though they are the greatest threat to our economic well-being.

In fact since the 1950’s the Big Blue River is cleaner every year than it has been since farming began here in the 1850’s. The reason is regulations on industry discharge, city and home septic systems, controls on livestock waste, and most of all soil erosion control. Soil loss is by far the number one pollutant in the Big Blue River. The early explorers in North America were looking for gold and spices, the get rich quick riches of the day. What they found was the richest crop production area that exists in the world.

The farming systems through the 1930’s raped the landscape and after the dust bowl and gullies as big a canyons in Gage County we started reforming our ways. We are losing the oral history of that time with every obituary of farmers and landowners in the County. The legacy of that era is has been built upon and needs to continue into our future.

The Natural Resource Conservation Service target for soil loss is five tons per acre per year. Most farmers know that that is not a sustainable level. We are currently are at an estimated (by me) 2.5 tons per acre per year with the best conservation farmers at half that level. The worst would not make the five-ton mark. We are at a point where stream bank erosion from the creek straightening which was once allowed is an increasingly significant factor we need to address.

Based on numbers from Field to Market assessments, we are making progress. The past thirty years have seen farmers reduce erosion by 67 percent. We have reduced irrigation use per acre by 53 percent. We are faced with the challenge of more acres being irrigated from both surface and groundwater sources. Increased control of water use is likely in our future. We have decreased land use per bushel by 30percent. We have lowered energy use per bushel by 43 percent (nitrogen fertilizer, irrigation water and tillage are the big three). We have lowered greenhouse gas emissions by 36 percent and increase production by 101 percent.

About 150 irrigators in Gage and Saline County use the Big Blue as a water source and 50 in the Little Blue River. The Blue River Basin Compact with Kansas designates the water use. In July the Big Blue must run over 80 cubic feet per second (cfs) into Kansas and the Little Blue 75cfs. You can check water levels on our Website, gage.unl.edu, Select Ag and scroll down to the URL connections.

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