Wet Vac to suck sand to renew river

By Bill Byrns
Journal writer

A gritty, amorphous mass of sand is oozing out of Indiana downstream to Illinois.

It smothers life, it blankets riffles where air and water mix and, unquestionably, it is destroying the Kankakee River.

But soon a slice of this slithering slug will be sucked from the stream as a first step in plans to restore the river.

Battle lines have been set in the wetlands near the Indiana state line, where an aquatic ecosystem restoration is already in the planning stages.

Here, in an isolated world of winding river, planners hope also to restore the stream's flow and aquatic habitat, restore lost wetlands and return native mussels.

The work is a joint effort between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and the Kankakee River Basin Partnership.

Described by Congressman Jerry Weller as the "first step" in restoring the river the planning is part of an aquatic ecosystem restoration project near the Indiana state line.

Ground zero for the project is an area of sediment downstream from the Indiana state line, near property owned by Jack Nelson and the Nelson family.

According to Steve Engelking, vice president of the river partnership, Nelson has already entered into a sale agreement with the DNR and the Kankakee River Conservancy District. Negiotiations are underway on the remaining tracts along the river.

Sand removal at this location most likely would employ a system similar to a "wet-vac" that would suck sediments from the river bottom.

State officials, ever sensitive to "politically correct" language, shun using the "dredge" word promising instead a high tech sand sweeping system that will not change the natural shape of the river channel.

Sand removed from the river would be temporarily stored on nearby land.

According to studies by the U.S. Geological Survey, an estimated 133,600 cubic yards of sand was deposited between 1980 and 1994 in this portion of the river.

Other studies by the Illinois Natural History Survey show a steady decline in mussels along the river. In particular, the upstream section suffered a significant decline between 1960 and 1978 due to an increased sand load in the Momence Wetlands.

Last month, Congressman Jerry Weller and others announced an alliance wherein the Corps will pay up to $5 million or 65 percent of the total cost for the project. The state will provide the remaining dollars from its general revenue fund and from Conservation 2000 money previously awarded to the Momence- based conservancy district.

By June, a preliminary draft of the restoration plan should be ready for public review, Corps officials promised.