In Bureau County, Lee and LaSalle counties, a broad partnership is restoring the health of Big Bureau Creek and its surrounding communities.

Watershed Wellness

Story By Jeff Boeckler and James Adamson
Photos By James Adamson

For many centuries, Native Americans found in Bureau Valley a wild paradise abounding in game and fish and profuse with wild nuts and fruits. It was an area with rich soils where corn, squash and other crops could be grown with little effort.

Early accounts of Bureau Valley describe rolling prairies with fertile soil for farming. Settlers found abundant clay, sand, gravel and timber resources for building roads, homes and businesses. Ample water in lakes, springs and rivers provided food and a means of transportation.

The Big Bureau Creek Watershed continues to support large blocks of intact wildlife habitat amid thousands of acres of conservation practices implemented over the years. Impacts from agriculture and urban development remain, but significant opportunity exists for more work to be undertaken.

Big Bureau Creek, the backbone of Bureau County, is a 498-square-mile watershed with high-quality streams that provide an amazing resource for fishing, canoeing and other recreational opportunities.

Over time, those fortunate to have had the opportunity to explore the watershed since childhood noticed significant changes, and they recognized the need for improvements. A comprehensive watershed report seemed a logical step to collect recommendations necessary for making future, informed decisions.

Begun in 2003, the Big Bureau Creek Watershed Initiative brought together expertise and support from organizations,

Big Bureau Creek has abundant, forested floodplains. North of Princeton, a covered bridge is a local historical landmark.

watershed residents and individuals, and resulted in development of the Big Bureau Creek Watershed Plan. Led by staff from V3 Companies of Illinois and Department of Natural Resources, the inventory and evaluation has become a road map for specific watershed implementation strategies.

Hours of field work resulted in the information needed to quantify watershed conditions (quality of the watershed, where and why any problems were originating, and how to resolve them) and justify the need for financial resources to enhance water quality, wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities. Through the process, a mechanism was developed to stimulate local partnerships, educate residents and landowners in the watershed and raise awareness of this area throughout the state.

Studies conducted by the team included water quality, channel stability, flooding and the presence of mussels.

Strategies outlined in the document will not only benefit the watershed locally but will make a difference to the Illinois and Mississippi river basins as a whole. The success of this watershed plan is its proactive nature—using collected data, prioritizing recommendations, identifying specific conservation practices tied to actual locations on the ground and quantifying the benefits of doing or not doing the particular practice.

Maintaining an interest and stake in the health of Big Bureau Creek requires continued effort at the local level to bring together and educate landowners to ensure that those that live in the watershed have a voice in the future of Big Bureau Creek.

Building a Plan

Partners responsible for creating the Big Bureau Creek inventory and evaluation included Department of Natural Resources (Offices of Resource Conservation, Reality and Environmental Planning and Water Resources, and Illinois Natural History Survey), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau County Soil and Water Conservation District and V3 Companies of Illinois. Local and dedicated resident Mike Scott kept the momentum going, got the word out and assisted with data-collection activities. Without the coordination, professional knowledge and experience of all involved, this project would not have been possible.

Recent efforts to increase involvement of watershed residents have included securing funding to hire a local watershed coordinator as well as conducting two public meetings where information about the quality of Big Bureau was presented and where residents had a chance to voice their concerns. Numerous additional outreach and education efforts are planned.

Opportunities also are being pursued for on-the-ground projects. DNR, Bureau County SWCD and NRCS are working with a private landowner to restore and place under permanent easement more than 360 acres of habitat in the lower reaches of the watershed through the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. The Illinois CREP is a cooperative effort between landowners, state, local and federal agencies designed to enhance the Illinois River by protecting water quality and land in the watershed.

For more information on this watershed initiative or if you would like to get involved, contact the Bureau Co SWCD at (815) 875-8732 (ext. 3) or visit www.princeton-il.com/watershed. For more information on the watershed inventory and evaluation, contact Jeff Boeckler, DNR at (217) 725-3181 or jeff.boeckler@illinois.gov. A copy of the I&E also is available at the Web site above.

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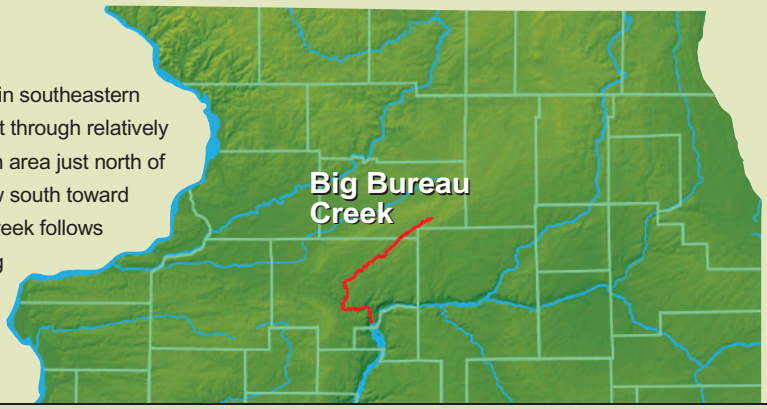
Locating Big Bureau Creek

Big Bureau Creek is 75 miles in length from its headwaters in southeastern Lee County to the Illinois River. The creek flows southwest through relatively flat ground in Lee and northern Bureau County until reaching an area just north of Princeton. At Princeton its gradient increases and begins to flow south toward the Hennepin Canal. Once reaching the Hennepin Canal, the creek follows its natural course eastward along side the canal before turning south again at Interstate 180, eventually emptying into Goose Lake, near Miller Anderson Woods State Nature Preserve. Goose Lake then flows into the Illinois River.