

From septics to Ag BMPs in Louisiana

The Coulee Baton Stream microwatershed is the center of an effort by a conservation district, RC&D and other partners to address both agricultural and residential water quality.

AN effort to address water quality in the Coulee Baton Stream microwatershed is long on solutions and short on finger pointing.

As a result, agricultural producers and residential homeowners can both take voluntary steps toward improvements. The Vermilion Soil and Water Conservation District and Acadiana Resource Conservation and Development Council are among several partners in the efforts.

The Coulee Baton was chosen because of its diverse topography, drainage and land use. Focusing on all the stakeholders in the area was a deliberate strategy. "We want to stay away from finger pointing," says Ernest Girouard, chair of the Vermilion District Board. "The goal is to

identify the problems and have everyone do their share to improve water quality. We figured it had to be a team approach to promote ownership. If everyone accepts ownership and everyone does their part, you can make a difference." Field trips and public meetings are used to reach out to farmers, landowners and homeowners with educational information.

In addition to local stakeholders, state environmental and agriculture agencies and university researchers are also involved. "That's a result of our conservation district's work in the past," Girouard says.

The program is supported by Environmental Protection Agency 319 Grants administered by the state Department

of Environmental Quality. One phase of the effort that has drawn attention provides cost sharing of up to 60 percent to residential homeowners who want to upgrade their septic systems.

The work is definitely needed. A preliminary survey found that 55 of 110 homes discharge directly into a public ditch with no secondary treatment of sewage. The project will allow all 110 homeowners in the 6,200-acre watershed the opportunity to participate with a maximum cost-share of \$4,000 per system for repair or replacement of their systems. At least three options are provided, all of them leading to better treatment of wastes. A separate 319 Grant covers monitoring of the impacts of septic system improvements over five years.

Many of the homeowners lack the resources to pay for improvements themselves, Girouard says. Some will struggle to come up with their part of the cost-share, and the district continues to search for other funding to help them.

Outreach to homeowners has been extensive. Six meetings have been held to educate them about options. "We're trying to show them that part of being a good land steward is to make sure your sewer system is up to snuff," Girouard says.

Three demonstration sites were chosen to display options available to

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*Ernest Girouard
Chair of the Vermilion District Board*



Efforts to address water quality in the Coulee Baton Stream microwatershed include a program to replace residential septic systems. Public meetings sponsored by the Vermilion Soil and Water Conservation District and Acadiana Resource Conservation and Development Council educate residents about their options for cost-sharing projects.

homeowners. They include a spray irrigation system, a rock field with water plants and the more conventional systems that rely on absorption into the soil.

Another area of work in the Coulee Baton focuses on encouraging agricultural producers and other landowners to apply best management practices, including improved watering systems for cattle and cross-fencing to protect waterways. The partners are also working with rice producers on BMPs to reduce sediment and stream loading when irrigation water is released. Federal Environmental Quality Incentives Program funds provide cost-sharing for that work.

Farmers in the area are also encouraged to participate in the state's Master

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Farmer Program, an intensive educational program that leads to development of an NRCS resource management system plan and state certification. The voluntary program is an effort to achieve conservation gains without regulation. Girouard serves as area agent for the Master Farmer Program. He notes that the southwest region where he works has the most participants. Maybe that’s

because he farmed himself for 35 years after earning a PH.D. at Louisiana State University.

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