

Greenway on the Red: The Time for Partnerships is Now

ABSTRACT

Greenway on the Red (GOR) is one of 14 interrelated strategies for basin-wide flood mitigation identified by the International Flood Mitigation Initiative. The mission of GOR is “to promote the development of a greenway system on the Red River of the North and its tributaries that mitigates flood damage and protects people through education and partnerships that enhance the economy, environment and communities of the Red River Basin.” Flooding is inevitable and part of healthy river systems. However, the degree and frequency to which flooding occurs and damages incurred can be influenced by human activities and decisions. Human activities have played a role in recent devastating landscape events. Drainage can have a positive economic impact for limited areas that can sometimes promote the viability of family farmer/rural stakeholders. However, there are impacts to areas that provide greater services than the goods that are produced within those acres. There is an inherent cost of services not accounted for when riparian areas are degraded and wetlands are drained. Services from a healthy ecosystem include (but are not limited to): improved nutrient cycling, increased water holding capacity of soils, improved water quality, potential flood mitigation, and aquifer recharge. Ecosystem health is an important issue because these often overlooked services coincides with concerns about flooding, water quality and water supply issues in the Red River Basin. Strategic watershed restoration is not a cure all, but benefits can be recognized and quantified. Degraded riparian areas and drained wetlands should be targeted for watershed restoration projects. Other water conservation efforts and urban/rural landscape practices affecting water quality can be incorporated and “piggyback” with the watershed restoration projects. Strategic watershed restoration projects can be a primary tool to assist in providing the services many stakeholders are concerned about (i.e. flooding, water quality/quantity, and wildlife habitat). Potential funding sources for these projects include applicable Farm Bill programs, state-based initiatives, and private funding. Issues about the length of easements need to be resolved in some areas, but economic issues should be addressed for the long-term sustainability of the family farmer, while providing long-term ecosystem sustainability through the designation of land uses that are compatible with natural variations within the Red River Basin. Other potential recreation and tourism benefits can be realized through creative endeavors (i.e. birding trails, canoe trails, bed and breakfasts, etc.). These efforts can further enhance positive economic impacts for both rural and urban stakeholders. Other watershed-based strategies include the Red River Basin Watershed Initiative Proposal submitted jointly by the Red River Basin Institute and the Red River Basin Commission, with an overriding goal to protect the ecological integrity of the Red River Basin. The proposal also seeks to promote policies in water and management decisions that will accomplish the balance required for a healthy basin-wide ecosystem. Key components to be addressed by the proposal include: flooding, adequate and clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreational and natural aesthetic values. The start to a healthier ecosystem begins with partnerships with on-the-ground folks who will help implement these strategic restoration projects. The Red River Basin Riparian Project is an excellent example of a successful partnership with multiple benefits. In addition, a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program is currently being developed, and has the potential to restore upwards of 200,000 acres within the basin. I would like to end with a quote by Douglas Chadwick which states “from now on it’s what we give back to nature, not what we take from it, that will make our world a better place to live.”