
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Background

Southwestern Pennsylvania is embodied in an industrial legacy, with natural resource-related industries – primarily coal and steel – playing key roles in the region’s original rapid growth. Coal mining in Pennsylvania began during the 1700s, and by the 1800s the coal of Pennsylvania was fueling and stimulating the growth of western Pennsylvania’s steel industry. After nearly a century of industrial zeal, the steel industry began a downward spiral during the 1940s. Although coal was redirected for use in the electricity industry, many mines have since closed, leaving a landscape and its rivers branded by its history.

Like so many other streams in southwestern Pennsylvania, the effects of past coal mining activities have scarred the Sewickley Creek watershed. Streams of red flow through backyards, aquatic life in some areas remains minimal due to the metal and nutrient choked waters, and as a result, children are dissuaded from playing in streams. Although some water quality improvements have been made over the past two decades, work remains to be done to improve the quality of the Sewickley Creek watershed.

In 1992, an industrious group of stakeholders decided to assert a positive influence within their watershed, forming the currently active Sewickley Creek Watershed Association (SCWA). The initial interest of the group was to focus on abandoned mine drainage remediation, but as the group grew to include a greater diversity of people, they realized the importance of taking a more holistic approach to their watershed community. SCWA has taken the responsibility to clean up this watershed, maintaining their mission to “promote the conservation of natural resources, monitor and improve water quality, and advocate wise land use practices in the Sewickley Creek Watershed.” As part of its mission, SCWA decided to formulate a plan for the watershed through the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR) Rivers Conservation Program, which lays out the environmental and cultural characteristics of the watershed, related issues and concerns, and management options available to them. The Sewickley Creek Watershed Conservation Plan resulted from that decision. The recommended solutions poise the Sewickley Creek watershed community for strong interaction with several important organizations including federal and state agencies, environmental groups, private businesses, non-profit organizations, and others.

Since the formation of the SCWA, the group has been able to put a number of projects on the ground including abandoned mine drainage remediation projects, streambank stabilization projects, rails to trails expansions, beautification projects and the development of a biotic study area at the Westmoreland County Community College. Future projects that the group is looking forward to include enhancing environmental education and recreational opportunities for youth as well as adults, and continuing projects for streambank stabilization and mine drainage treatment. The group hopes to expand its efforts by having a multi-focused approach, creating new partnerships, increasing membership, and adding new staff.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to create a vision for the future of the Sewickley Creek Watershed. The citizens of the watershed community were actively involved in developing this plan via public meetings and interviews. Valuable resources that need restoration, protection, conservation, and/or preservation were revealed by the stakeholders of the watershed. The goal was to develop a way to make the vision for the watershed a reality. Practical solutions and action steps were created, and resources were identified to implement it. The Sewickley Creek Watershed Conservation Plan can be used to assist groups and citizens that work and/or live in the watershed to obtain resources to fulfill the vision set forth for the area. The Watershed Conservation Plan should also be used in planning for long-term growth.

One objective of this project is to restore and enhance the Sewickley Creek watershed as a natural resource and regional asset by implementing solutions and action plans. This can be achieved by working with a variety of organizations, as set forth in this Watershed Conservation Plan. Another objective of this project is to increase environmental education in the watershed. Even with the vast array of environmental education programs available in the region, many residents and stakeholders are still unaware about basic watershed functions and the interaction of human activities and natural processes. Establishing programs to inform residents and stakeholders, including youth, of the watershed and environmental issues within the Sewickley Creek watershed in an ongoing manner is needed. Getting the residents and stakeholders actively involved in their watershed increases the pride they have for their watershed and community.

Planning Process

The Watershed Conservation Plan process was launched at the Sewickley Creek Watershed Association annual picnic in August 2001. Area residents were given the opportunity to share their knowledge of the watershed and express their concerns by completing a survey.

In efforts to involve municipal officials in the plan, all municipalities within the watershed were invited to attend a special municipal officials meeting in November 2001. This meeting served as an informational session on Watershed Conservation Plans for municipal officials to see how they can become involved and how the plan would be able to help their municipalities.

With the plan starting to take shape, stakeholders' concerns and issues were brought to the forefront. Two sessions of public meetings were held in May 2002 for stakeholders to share their concerns. These meetings gave the public a chance to envision what they wanted for the future of their watershed and the opportunity to prioritize their issues.

One year into the planning process, residents were given an update at the Sewickley Creek Watershed Association annual picnic. In addition to the update, volunteers from the Steering Committee and the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy Watershed Assistance Center interviewed area residents to gather more community input for the plan.

With the completion of the draft plan, stakeholders were given another opportunity to express their views. A public meeting was held in May 2003 to present the draft plan. Comments from the draft plan were collected and incorporated into the final plan. A final public meeting was held on August 21, 2003 to present and distribute the final document.

Implementation

This document is meant to be utilized by any interested citizen, group, or agency interested in improving the quality of life in the Sewickley Creek watershed. This document should serve as a reference and an educational tool to promote the conservation of natural resources, monitor and improve water quality, and advocate sound land use practices.

Implementation of this plan is the responsibility of the entire watershed community and depends upon cooperation and collaboration among many different organizations. Partnering among organizations not only helps spread the workload and potentially increase the membership of the organizations, it is also a way to enhance funding opportunities. Although the SCWA will likely spearhead many of the projects that occur throughout the watershed, numerous partnerships are needed in order for the entire project to be successful. In addition, many of the management recommendations entail changes in regulations and ordinances, which requires the cooperation of local government officials.

Involvement of local municipal officials in watershed efforts is a critical program component. Decisions that affect the overall quality of the watershed, such as establishing ordinances affecting zoning, development, stormwater, and sewage begin at the local level. Municipal cooperation and collaboration on any community project provides the needed local connectivity for success.

Management Recommendations

This chapter of the plan provides a matrix of the various issues from each of the chapters. The recommendations were made as a result of the issues identified at the municipal and public meetings and from individual comments. This matrix of recommendations includes issues, recommended approaches, potential partners, potential funding sources, and priority ratings. The recommended approach is the action step, or objective, of the recommendation. Potential partners are groups with the resources best suitable to assist on meeting the objectives. Potential funding sources identify avenues through which the objectives may be financed. The priority rating was determined by public comment and response and is based on need, feasibility, and probability of funding.

These management recommendations are suggestions to improve the quality of life within the watershed. It is important to note that these suggestions are non-regulatory in nature and are to be used only as a guide. No limitations to the number or types of partners or funding opportunities should be assumed due to ever-changing circumstances. Creativity is encouraged.