A Reflection on Sediment-laden Water

I recently read an article from the "Keeping It On the Land" (Vol. 8, No. 3, Great Lakes Commission on Sediment and Erosion Control). Dr. Baker at Heidelberg College wrote about a couple of storm events that preceded a NASA photo shot of a Sandusky Bay sediment plume. The surprising thing about the article is the conclusion that nothing was out of the ordinary. The sediment loads of the Sandusky River were typical. The flows were normal for the type of rainfall. Even the comparison of the past 9 years of data remained consistent.

What astonished me was the fact that these "average" and "typical" rainfalls produced enormous amounts of sediment. There was approximately 36,000 tons of sediment that flowed past this one river gauge from just these two storm events. That's the equivalent of 360 low, open-top rail cars filled with dirt. Considering each rail car is 90 feet long, it would make a train over 6 miles long! If this train went by you at a crossing at the rate of 24 miles per hour, it would take over 15 minutes for it to pass (this is approximated).

I recently completed a Great Lakes Commission grant project. The project was a documentary on sedimentation and soil erosion in the Maumee River Basin entitled "A Watershed Mentality". This collaborative effort was produced and shown on WFWA PBS-39 TV in the summer of 2007. In the course of this project, I have found that there are no "silver bullets" to reduce sediment and erosion. In fact, there usually aren't even individuals to be singled out as culprits.

No, instead of individuals there are groups and behaviors. Surprisingly, some of my behaviors are among them. Some of yours probably are as well. Finger-pointing does no good when it comes to this type of "non-point" source contamination. That's what sediment is, you know. When sediment enters a waterway, it contaminates and clogs the habitats and available oxygen for all the things that live, eats, and breathes in and around the water.

Unfortunately, that doesn't bode well for one of my favorite fish; walleye. Or smallmouth bass, or any of the other game fish that usually proliferate in our unique watersheds. Aside from the possible loss of retail sales, jobs and other benefits from the Maumee River fishing season, it means less fish.

It's amazing how minor things can blow up into something major. All because I forgot to seed a bare spot in my yard, or added concrete to my property. That's not even counting the number of times I accidentally forgot to pick up the dog poop in my back yard. Sediment carries that into the river too.

Well, I'm improving my behavior. Not just for the fish, but because it's the right thing to do. It's a small act, but a lot of small acts combine to have a tremendous impact.

As for the sediment on that train, it doesn't include the amount of soil that was halted in dams, floodplains, buffer strips or even just buried on the river bottom. We can be glad for what didn't happen.

It will take a long time to have a major impact on sedimentation. This whole "stewardship of the Earth" thing is tough. The good news is that small changes work. Together we can shorten the train, or at least slow it down.

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