

Volunteer Stream Monitoring Project, Flint River Watershed Coalition

The Flint River Watershed Coalition's Water Monitoring Program was initially established in 1999 with less than 15 sites and has since expanded to 34 sites across Genesee, Lapeer, and neighboring counties. In June of 2010 the FRWC was awarded a grant through MiCorps to accomplish the following: a.) collect accurate and representative macroinvertebrate population data for use as a biological measure of water quality, as well as obtaining qualitative habitat assessment data pertaining to the sites of macroinvertebrate collection; and b.) to seek sustainable funding sources and build the capacity of the monitoring program so that it may continue to reach out to more sites and more volunteers. Through the hard work of staff and volunteers, we have met these goals and continue to move forward to further improve and expand the water monitoring program. Both volunteers and staff are encouraged to offer input and suggestions, and evaluations of training sessions and monitoring seasons have been implemented. The program coordinator has attended several workshops on Water Monitoring to explore new ways of improving the current program.

Since the start of the grant reporting period, 6 volunteer training sessions have been held with a total of 89 new and returning monitors attending, and 6 monitoring sessions have been held with a cumulative total of 318 volunteers monitoring up to 34 sites a season. Due to the number of available volunteers, not all 34 sites have been monitored on a consistent basis every season. Volunteer retention and recruitment has been one of the program's biggest challenges to overcome. To improve the number of volunteers available each season, the FRWC established contacts with local universities, school groups, environmental groups, and religious organizations. The FRWC is also utilizing social media more effectively to communicate with potential volunteers. This has increased the number of volunteers available, with the goal over the next several years being all 34 sites monitored consistently so that more sites can be added.

The other main challenge faced has been the weather. Severe flooding during the spring of 2012 and 2013 seasons caused both training and monitoring dates to be rescheduled, and in some cases streams stayed too high for volunteers to enter before the monitoring season ended. In those cases volunteers completed as much of the stream habitat form as possible and noted the conditions that prevented them from completing the assessment and collection. An additional complication in getting all 34 sites monitored during those seasons was that volunteers who were scheduled for the original monitoring dates were not available on the rescheduled dates. A larger volunteer pool will help to minimize any complications caused by dates being rescheduled.

By offering training sessions each season for both new and returning volunteers, the water monitoring program has seen its volunteers become more knowledgeable in the proper procedures and as a result, the data collected is more accurate and reliable. Trained volunteers are encouraged to attend training a minimum of once every 2 years to ensure they are following proper procedure. A continuing goal of the program is to offer more opportunities for specialized training in regards to identifying to family level and increase the number of certified master identifiers to assist with verification in the lab. Evaluation sheets are handed out to the volunteers to assess satisfaction with the program and highlight areas that need improvement.

Currently the data collected is shared with the public in several ways. Stream scores are posted on the FRWC website (www.flintriver.org), included in our annual report, shared with local agencies such as the Genesee County Drain Commission and entered into the MiCorps database. Stream score letters are sent prior to each season to land owners living adjacent to monitoring sites and starting with the fall 2013 season will also be included with the thank you letters sent to volunteer monitors. Monitoring data is made available at outreach activities including presentations to groups and at booth events held throughout the year.

Over the years, we have partnered with multiple organizations on the water monitoring program. Genesee County Drain Commission has provided volunteers and financial assistance, Michigan State University-Extension has provided volunteers, including the services of some of our Master Identifiers as well as a location to hold our trainings and labs each season, Genesee County Parks generously donates space to hold training sessions. The Lapeer Conservation District has donated space to store our Lapeer Chapter monitoring supplies off season as well as occasionally providing a location for lab days, the Chatfield Schools has donated space for lab days and meetings, and the University of Michigan – Flint for donating supplies and support services.

Going forward, the FRWC's water monitoring program will continue to monitor twice a year assisted in part by the financial support of the Genesee County Drain Commission and will continue to seek out other sources of funding. For the fall of 2013, the water monitoring committee is considering adding several sites to the 34 already being monitored.