



## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S LETTER ON COMMON PURPOSE

These days, you only have to turn on cable television or thumb through social media to see people arguing – sometimes for no reason at all.

It pleases me immensely to report that you will not witness this phenomenon on your Basin Development Commission or its Technical Advisory Committee.

The nine members that I am privileged to serve come from varying backgrounds. They each have unique personal and professional experiences. They all hold different priorities for the Kankakee and Yellow Rivers, and they each possess their own principles of governing.

Yet when they convene, they have but one goal: the long-term betterment of the Kankakee River Basin. When differences of opinion are expressed, it is for the purpose of forging consensus. When views are stated, they are accepted as ideas that demand careful consideration.

You simply could not assemble a more civil and dedicated group. They represent the basin well.

I remain available to answer questions on our website or at [sdpelath@gmail.com](mailto:sdpelath@gmail.com). I highly value new ideas and input.

Sincerely,

Scott D. Pelath  
Executive Director  
Kankakee River Basin and  
Yellow River Basin

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## Basin Development Commission off to running start

While the events of 2020 will long be remembered, for us in Northwest Indiana, it also will mark the beginning of real change along the Kankakee and Yellow Rivers.

Since it first was formed in July 2019, the challenges faced by the new Basin Development Commission have been daunting. For over a century, the Kankakee River Basin has received heightened amounts of water. Channel velocities have increased, and sedimentary erosion is at times relentless. Hard surfaces have increased runoff, and both natural and manmade obstructions have limited and redirected the flow of water.

For decades, our region's residents, farmers, and businesses have desired long-term solutions to these problems, but the means for transformational improvements were lacking.

"We now have the ability to truly do something," said Commission Chair and St. Joseph County Surveyor John McNamara. "Before, we could only dream of anything more than band-aids on the Kankakee and Yellow Rivers. After all these years, it is gratifying to see work boots on the ground."

Through an initial \$2.3 million appropriation from the State of Indiana, the Commission already has completed or initiated the following work through the efforts of its members and stakeholders:

- **Cleared and prevented severe logjams in the upper Kankakee River in LaPorte and Starke Counties;**
- **Repaired failing river banks;**
- **Kept the Illinois-Indiana State Line Bridge free of obstructions;**
- **Commenced the transition of a 200-acre Newton County property into floodwater storage;**
- **Contributed local funding for a federal bank repair project in Jasper County;**
- **Commissioned the redesign of 1.5 miles of Yellow River bank in Marshall and Starke Counties;**
- **Funded a logjam management pilot program in Porter County;**
- **Maintained two existing sediment traps in the Kankakee and Yellow Rivers; and**
- **Sanctioned a streambank stabilization project in Lake County.**

"Although work takes time, it is impressive what the Commission has achieved in such a short period," said Executive Director Scott Pelath. "It can take years to address decades of growing conditions, but this group of appointees is already delivering results."

Meeting minutes, policies, and recent information about the Commission's projects and activities can be found at [kankakeeandyellowrivers.org](http://kankakeeandyellowrivers.org).

## Commission Surveys Endangered Bat Populations

This summer, the Commission conducted a study of the Kankakee River's endangered bat populations.

In our area, the federal government lists both the Indiana bat and the northern long eared bat as endangered or threatened.

Because of regulatory limitations on activities that might disturb these species, the Commission analyzed two, 2.5-mile sections of the Kankakee River for bat presence. If evidence confirms the absence of endangered species, the data could provide the Commission more flexibility in the length of its work season.

So far, the results are mixed. The study indicated bat presence upstream in LaPorte and Starke Counties, but did not confirm presence in Porter County. The Commission currently awaits the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's further consideration of our data.



Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*)

## Commission Lays Groundwork for Long-Term Outcomes

River work is easy to describe. Workers are present. A bank breached, and now is repaired. A logjam altered river flow, and now is removed. Water once flowed on to someone's farm, and now finds its way to natural storage.

But much the same as with a football team, winning efforts begin between games and off the field.

Here are just a few examples of the Commission's "inside work" that lead to results:

- **Adopted an award-winning 40-year work plan**
- **Supported Indiana DNR's outstanding work to determine the Kankakee Basin's exact boundaries**
- **Implemented policies to ensure that public dollars are spent carefully and wisely**
- **Partnered with experienced stakeholders to secure expert technical assistance**
- **Educated senior federal and state policymakers on the basin's unique needs**

## THIS EDITION'S FEATURED STAKEHOLDER

Nicole Messacar, LaPorte County SWCD



The Commission simply cannot carry out its mission without the direct engagement of folks who care.

**Nicole Messacar**, the Education Coordinator for the LaPorte County Soil and Water Conservation District, is one such person.

Nicole is well-known to Commission members as a longtime advocate of Kankakee River education. The Kankakee River Days program, which she expertly designed and implemented, has tutored thousands of school-age children about the unique history of the Kankakee River and its contemporary challenges.

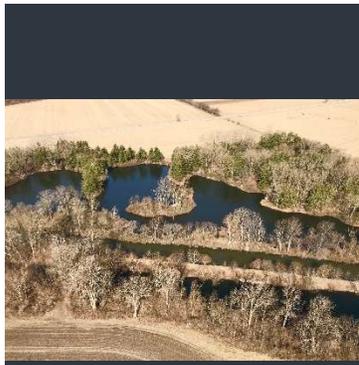
When the pandemic postponed this year's program, Nicole immediately replaced it with two new partnership opportunities.

With Commission financial assistance, she applied for – and won – a technical assistance grant to promote wetland programs in the Kankakee Basin. At present, Nicole is working to hire a grant coordinator to develop our region's water resources.

Not one to rest on short-term successes, Nicole then secured the Commission's support to expand the LaPorte and Porter County's invasive tree exchange program. Next year, the popular pilot project will now include both the Lake Michigan and Kankakee basins.

Determined, ideas-driven advocates like Nicole Messacar put discussion into action. They remain an essential natural resource.





## DID YOU KNOW?

Until the end of the 19th century, the Kankakee River was nearly 240 miles long, following a meandering course through the Grand Kankakee Marsh. Encompassing 5,300 square miles, the marsh was one of the largest wetland complexes in the United States.

## KANKAKEE RIVER BASIN: AN OVERVIEW

- The Kankakee River Basin in Indiana consists of areas that drain to the Kankakee River and its major tributary, the Yellow River.
- In Indiana alone, the basin covers about 1.3 *million* acres, of which 1.1 million acres are cropland.
- A measurable increase in major precipitation events, relentless sediment erosion, and an inefficient use of flood control assets have made the Kankakee and Yellow River channels increasingly difficult to manage.
- Increased frequency of heavy precipitation is predicted to continue, suggesting that a new management strategy for economic vitality, sustainable agriculture, and our natural resources is necessary.
- As flooding continues to increase in frequency and magnitude, economic costs will also increase.

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