

**Our Mission:**

To provide water quality education and funding for cost effective clean water projects that improve the North Fork Ninnescah Watershed which feeds Cheney Lake.

# H2info

CHENEY LAKE WATERSHED, INC.

WINTER 09-10

## Celebrating 15 years of Progress!

By Howard Miller

### Where We Are Today

This is the third of a four-part series looking back at 15 years of Watershed Management. Part Four - is a look ahead.

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*The year 2009 marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cheney Lake Water Quality Project. Previous articles in this series have looked at the project history. This time we look at where we are today in achieving our watershed goals.*

Change can be measured in many ways. As we reflect on the progress of our watershed community we can consider changes in the way we think, changes on our farms and ranches, and changes in water quality measurements. The Citizens Management Committee (CMC) is the primary group responsible for creating an awareness of water quality issues in the watershed. The CMC has given thousands of hours of volunteer time to educate their fellow farmers and ranchers. They have hosted meetings and field days throughout the watershed and helped with education programs for children. But even more important are the countless hours spent by the



U.S. Geological Survey streamflow-gaging station —courtesy Jennifer Graham,USGS.

CMC working with local farmers and landowners, whether stopping by the side of the road or meeting informally at the local elevator to talk to their neighbors about what they could do on their own farms to improve water quality. The people who have served on the Citizens Management Committee over the past 15 years have definitely changed the way we think about our watershed and our farming practices.

Another way to measure progress is to look at how many conservation practices have been put in place in the watershed. To date, over 1,500 conservation practices have been installed by farmers and ranchers. Water quality monitoring results bear out the fact that some improvement in water quality has been made but it is not as significant as expected with that level of conservation practices installed. Jennifer Graham, United States

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## Celebrating 15 Years of Progress!

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Geological Survey (USGS), notes that the water quality changes can be subtle and difficult to measure. Tom Stiles, Kansas Department of Health & Environment, believes it may be that the right practices have been installed but not all of them are in areas that have the greatest impact on stream quality. Stiles, along with Lyle Frees of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, believe that a more focused approach may be a better method to improve water quality in Cheney Reservoir. Frees has used computer modeling to estimate the impact of various conservation practices in this watershed and his results show that location is critical.

In the past we have funded nearly all conservation practices by conscientious people volunteering to do the right thing for their land and for water quality in our watershed. This approach works well while cost share funds are readily available but in

leaner economic times we have begun to look more closely at how we create the effect we need with the dollars we have.

Whether or not we have achieved all of our goals, without question the Cheney Lake Watershed (CLW) project has gained much national attention because of the structure of governance. Jennifer Graham, USGS notes that “The CLW is the most proactive and cooperative watershed project I have seen anywhere in the nation.” The cooperative approach with the City of Wichita and the CMC working together for the common good is one-of-a-kind. So has the CLW project been a success? The answer is a resounding yes! And to remain successful we must focus our efforts where they will do the most good.

## Commentary—Why We Need to Focus Conservation Work

By  
Lisa  
French



A U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) fact sheet was recently released describing 12 years (1997–2008) of water quality data for the North Fork Ninnescah River and comparing these data with the water-quality goals established by the Cheney Lake Task Force in the early 1990’s. USGS, in cooperation with the city of Wichita, has collected and interpreted water-quality data in the Cheney Lake Watershed since 1996, and has monitored water quality continuously on the North Fork Ninnescah River since 1998.

My interpretation of the report indicates two key items: 1) There is not yet a discernable decrease in the total phosphorus and total suspended solids concentrations despite the implementation of more than 1500 conservation practices from 1994 -2009. This is partly due to a great degree of variability in rainfall and runoff in the monitoring years. 2) The phosphorus and suspended solids goals for baseflow conditions have never been met indicating those particular goals may be unattainable.

This report has generated a great deal of discussion regarding the impact of our watershed work. Members of the Citizens Management Committee have commented that this report indicates the need for long term efforts and also the need to increase our efforts in the areas that will provide the greatest impact. According to a USDA study, about 76% of the sediment load reaching Cheney comes from 10% of the basin. In order to impact water quality, we need to focus our work on the 10% rather than worrying about every acre. Deb Ary, Superintendent of Production and Pumping for the Wichita, has stated, “It will take a long

**Commentary**

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time to see the influence of best management practices on the water quality of Cheney Reservoir and its associated tributaries. Indeed improvements have been made; what would conditions be if we had done nothing since 1992?"

The fact sheet is available on the web at <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2009/3073/>.

**“Disproportionality Happens”**

By Lisa French

We all know how this works, whether we are talking about food safety recalls, drug abuse, or most any other issue. About 80% percent of the problem seems to be tied to a small segment of a larger group. Something very similar happens with soil erosion. According to Pete Nowak, Water Conservation Specialist in the College of Ag and Life Sciences at the University of Wisconsin, “disproportionality” is a big player when we start to talk about soil and water issues.

If we want to improve water quality conditions in Cheney Reservoir, not every acre in the

watershed is equal in impact. The acres that are most vulnerable – due to soil type, slope, distance to the stream, or other factors – have a greater impact than land that is flatter, further from a stream, etc. Erosion from one field in a critical area can overshadow the conservation work on nine other fields if we are measuring the impact on a stream. Sometimes the management on that one field could be similar to the management on the other nine. But its location and soil qualities require above-average conservation efforts to protect it against soil loss.

Instead of employing “random acts of conservation”, Nowak advocates a more focused approach. A watershed program should use limited resources to improve management in the most vulnerable areas. For the Cheney Lake Watershed, that is already becoming part of our policy. Using information from Kansas State University, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and common-sense observations, the Citizens Management Committee (CMC) has been able to identify areas in the watershed that are most likely to contribute sediment and phosphorus to the stream system. More and more incentives are being offered only in these areas. The CMC will continue to support good conservation projects throughout the watershed but for those of you who manage the land in these critical areas – please take advantage of our special offers!

**Personnel Changes**

**Melissa Reeves, part-time office coordinator for Cheney Lake Watershed since November of 2005, recently accepted a full-time position with the City of Hutchinson. The watershed staff and the Citizens Management Committee, and all those who work with our office will miss Melissa’s creativity, sense of humor, and excellent management of our office. We wish her well in her new position .**

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**No-Till on the  
Plains  
Winter Conference**  
January 26-27, 2010  
Bicentennial Center  
Salina, KS

**The CMC is offering \$100 scholarships for 1<sup>st</sup> time participants** who attend the largest no-till conference in North America. Scholarships of \$100 will be offered to producers who farm in the Cheney Lake Watershed and are attending the conference for the first time. Registration & trade show opens at 9 a.m. on Tuesday, January 26th. Tuesday's sessions will begin at 1:00 p.m. Wednesday 8:30 am to 5:30 pm Pre-registration is \$199 and walk-in registration is \$249. Please present your registration receipt to the Cheney Lake Watershed Project Office as soon as possible after the conference for your scholarship reimbursement. For more information on registration or the scholarship, call our office at 620-665-0231.

**off the mark**.com by Mark Parisi

