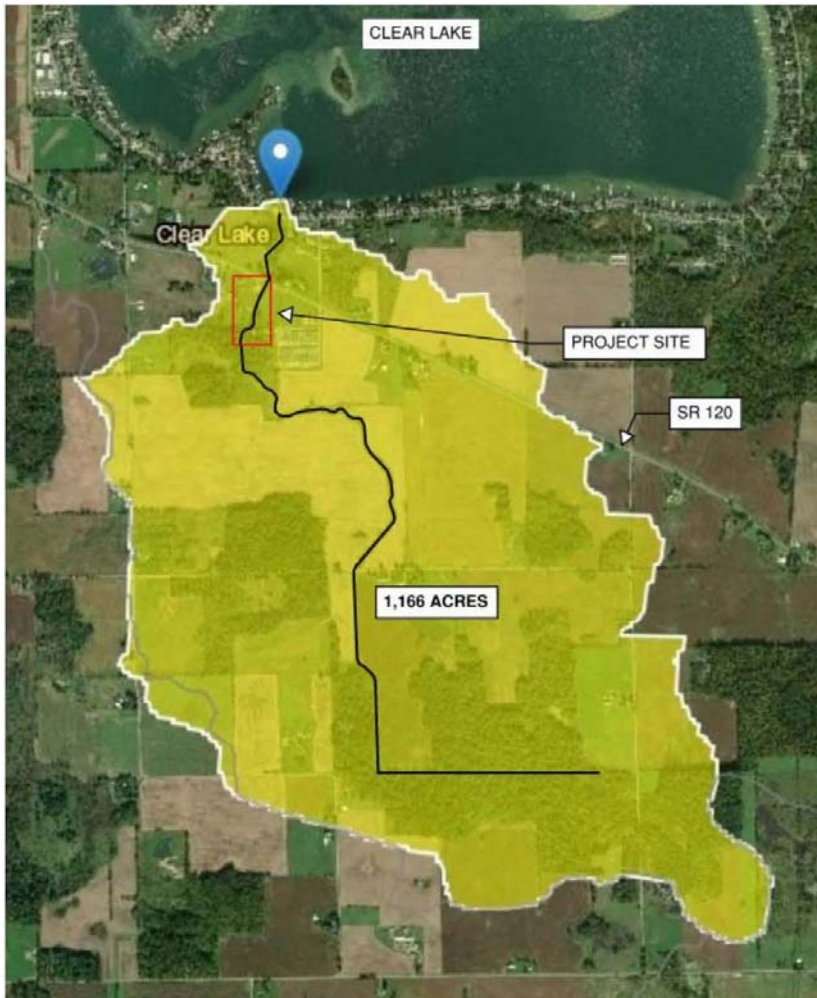


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NIPSCO grants bolster environmental projects

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This map shows the location of the Cyrus Brouse Ditch wetlands project, which aims to capture nutrients and sediment b flow into Clear Lake.

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Northern Indiana Public Service Company bolstered two Steuben County projects with Environmental Action Grants.

Over five years, NIPSCO's environmental grant has donated \$250,000 to 74 projects. This year's recipients were announced last week.

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“These grants leverage and expand on the environmental work we’re already focused on across the communities we serve, ranging from improvements in air and water quality, reforestation, restoration and environmental education,” said John Stout, NIPSCO manager of vegetation management. “The projects that were selected embody the vision of our conservation framework. We believe these projects will contribute toward enhancing a local quality of life and provide great value to the places where we all live and work.”



This year’s recipients feature pollinator habitats at Indiana Dunes, restoration projects at Steuben County’s Clear Lake and Carrol County’s Whistler Woods and multiple youth projects to support outdoor and nature engagement such as a trail at Ryan Park Elementary School, a teen conservation crew at the Fort Wayne Zoo and a student water quality monitoring program overseen by the LaGrange County Community Foundation and Friends of LaGrange County Parks.

Ryan Park Principal Amy Heavin said the grant to the Angola school will help improve an outdoor classroom area.

“The grant will support improvements to the trail with mulch, signage and birdhouses,” she said.

The Clear Lake project is a major effort. Not only NIPSCO but the Indiana Department of Natural Resource’s Lake and River Enhancement Grant program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have provided funding. A one-acre wetland is being constructed to help clean the water flowing into the Cyrus Brouse Ditch.

Of the four ditches flowing into Clear Lake, the Cyrus Brouse ditch drains 26% of the watershed and is the largest contributor by volume of all ditches entering the lake.

“In an effort organized and led by volunteer members of the Water Quality Committee, data collection has been done for over a decade on the county-regulated ditches flowing into Clear Lake and on the lake itself,” said Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy Executive Director Bridget Harrison.

Secchi depth readings have shown a consistent decrease in water clarity, she said, and an increase in nutrient levels. In total, 12 feet of depth has been lost over 24 years at an average of around 6 inches per year.

Increasing levels of chlorophyll is the primary cause for reductions in secchi depth. Chlorophyll increases when fed by nutrients like phosphorous and nitrogen.

Lawn and garden fertilizers are a main cause of nutrient loads, says the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association. Pet and wildlife wastes are also sources of nutrients that can lead to excessive algae growth.

A one-acre constructed wetland plus approximately 600 linear feet of one-sided two stage ditch upstream and downstream will be installed along the Cyrus Brouse Ditch.

“Both installations are best management practices shown to improve water quality,” said Harrison. “Streamflow into the wetland during large rain events will allow the nutrients and sediments to settle out.”

Using the Region 5 Environmental Protection Agency model, Harrison said the project should reduce sediment input by 1,647 tons a year, phosphorus input by 1,914 pounds per year and

nitrogen input by 3,849 pounds per year.

“By decreasing inputs of nutrients and sediments, we hope to improve water clarity, decrease the risk for harmful algae blooms and improve wildlife habitat,” she said.

Volunteers will help install native plants in and around the constructed wetland.

“The native plants will assist in the uptake of the nutrients from the streamflow,” said Harrison.

To top off the environmental enhancement effort, the Clear Lake Township Land Conservancy will lead a project to establish a Monarch butterfly habitat in an open space upland from the constructed wetland along with planting approximately 15 native trees.

Along with the grants to Indiana entities, NIPSCO itself is committed to maintaining its infrastructure while protecting the environment, said a news release announcing the grants. Among other efforts, NIPSCO works to establish early successional habitat on rights of way in an effort to create as much pollinator habitat as possible.

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