

NRCS Provides Emergency Watershed Protection to Northeastern Pennsylvania

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Heavy rains from Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee in August and September 2011 resulted in the worst flooding in history for northeastern Pennsylvania. A state of emergency was declared as the Susquehanna River surpassed its record high, damaging properties, closing state roads, and displacing thousands of residents.

Wyoming County was one of the hardest hit areas in Pennsylvania. Robert Richards, owner of two rental properties along Oxbow Creek, reports that about 400 feet of the creek bank was washed away in the rear of one of his properties. "The creek came up to 18 inches below the back porch, and I lost 30 feet of the back yard," said Richards. "There used to be stone steps, built in the mid-1930's that went to the creek, but they were also washed away."

After learning that federal disaster aid may be available, he immediately sought assistance. Working together, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Wyoming County Conservation District, and Wyoming County Commissioners determined the stream bank erosion was a threat for future flooding and to life and property and required immediate action.

To stabilize the streambank and prevent further erosion, over 400 feet of R-8 Rip Rap (i.e., large rocks) was installed along Richard's properties. "The toe of the stream bank and the bank itself are now protected so that any future high water will not cause further erosion that could result in the loss of life and property," said Ed Patchcoski, NRCS District Conservationist. Richards is grateful for the work that was done along Oxbow Creek and the assistance he received from the local NRCS and partnering organizations, and notes that additional flooding could have destroyed his homes.

Funding was provided by USDA's NRCS and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program, NRCS was able to pay 75 percent of the construction costs. As stipulated in the EWP regulations, local sponsors were responsible for the remaining 25 percent. DEP was able to provide the 25%, while the Wyoming County Commissioners stepped forward and handled local sponsorship and administrative concerns. The EWP program was established by Congress to help safeguard individuals and property by relieving imminent hazards caused by a sudden impairment to a watershed, such as flooding and erosion. Examples of measures carried out through EWP include debris removal from waterways that are causing threats to homes, businesses or utilities; reshaping and protecting eroding stream banks that endanger homes, businesses and utilities; and reseeding areas that are excessively eroding.

After Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee swept through Pennsylvania, NRCS surveyed 260 sites for damages last fall, and found 140 projects that were eligible for assistance through EWP. To date, 8 projects have been completed and the rest are expected to be completed by the end of this year. The majority of these projects are for stream bank stabilization in areas where private residence, business, or public utilities are threatened.

For more information about NRCS and its Emergency Watershed Protection Program, contact your local USDA Service Center, or visit us on the web at www.pa.nrcs.usda.gov.



Before: Severe flooding eroded about 30 feet of yard, bring the creek bank under the back porch.



After: Through NRCS's Emergency Watershed Protection program, over 400 feet of rip rap was installed to protect the stream bank and prevent further erosion that could cause loss of life and property.