

Limbo Creek's fate as public waterway or ditch at stake in Renville County

Local watchdogs called foul when the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources inexplicably removed Renville County's Limbo Creek from the Public Waters Inventory. The DNR is proposing to correct the inventory and return it and three other waterways in the county.

Written By: Tom Cherveney | Aug 15th 2020 - 10am.



The waters of Limbo Creek run as clear as a trout stream as they reach the Minnesota River in Renville County's Skalbekken Park. Tom Kalahar shows the clarity of the waters, which run through a series of wetland complexes surrounded by conservation lands before reaching the Minnesota River. Tom Cherveney / West Central Tribune

SACRED HEART — Pretty much anywhere a drop of rain might fall in Renville County, it can be flushed down a waterway within 48 hours, according to Tom Kalahar of Olivia.

The county's extensive drainage system, along with a wetter trending climate, are taking a toll. A flashy hydrology is cutting into river banks and contributing to erosion, and fast-moving water carries nutrients that would otherwise be absorbed by wetlands and vegetation, he explained.

It's why Kalahar, local advocacy groups including [Clean Up our River Environment](#), [Friends of the Minnesota Valley](#) and the [Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River](#) joined the [Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy](#) in pressing the [Minnesota Department of Natural Resources](#) to correct the Public Waters Inventory and place Limbo Creek back on that list.

The DNR announced this week it is proposing to put Limbo Creek, Sacred Heart Creek and parts of two smaller waterways in Beaver Falls and Cairo Townships back on the list, subject to a process that includes public comment through November 11.

If placed back on the list, it will provide some protections on how drainage projects can alter the waterways. A petition filed in 2017 seeks to open a 5,560-linear-foot channel in Limbo Creek at a township road, 820th Avenue, located south of Sacred Heart.

Currently, an underground tile that is County Ditch 77 outlets near the site, but sediment in the wetland complex that is Limbo Creek at this location covers it. An engineering report completed for the petition offers two options, with estimated costs ranging from \$232,720 to \$305,410 to restore the drainage capacity of County Ditch 77, which is a watershed of about 975 acres.

Limbo Creek is a series of wetland complexes in a watershed of 9,335 acres in portions of Wang, Ericson, Hawk Creek and Sacred Heart Townships of Renville County. Landowners enrolled many of the acres in conservation programs in the past two decades, to the benefit of water quality in the creek. The Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy touts the creek in a YouTube video as the [last remaining natural waterway](#) in Renville County.

Its upstream wetland complexes are thick with cattails and the nutrients carried in the water, but Kalahar said these wetlands and the conservation lands bordering them do their job. At the creek's outlet into the Minnesota River in Skalbekken County Park, the waters run as clear as a trout stream.

It might all change for the worse, he said, if Limbo Creek is not protected and becomes County Ditch 145. That is what it was designated when the first petition to increase drainage in it was filed in the early 1970's. That petition was eventually rejected by affected landowners, as was a project proposed in the 1990's that would have installed large pumps to benefit drainage on County Ditch 77.

Limbo Creek, under the name of County Ditch 145, was removed from the Public Waters Inventory in 2017 for reasons not known by those seeking to return it to the list. "And lo and behold, here it comes back again," said Kalahar of the most recent [petition](#) for an open channel.

Allowing an open channel to improve the County Ditch 77 outlet will just be the start of the problems, according to Kalahar. He fears that it will open the way for more pattern tiling in upstream land. That, he said, would mean more flow into Limbo Creek.

"Look what's happened to Hawk Creek," he said. "It's not a creek. It's a river living in a creek's skin and it just doesn't work."

Adding flow to Limbo Creek will lead to the same flashy hydrology that has carved away the banks of Hawk Creek, he said. Hawk Creek is eroding away farmland, and threatens an entire farm place and public infrastructure along its path. Since the mid-1980's, Hawk Creek had meandered 10 to 15 feet in places where it would only be expected to move by two to three feet.

Kalahar's passion for Limbo Creek has not exactly made him popular with landowners seeking to improve County Ditch 77. Gerald Peterson, who lives near the outlet, flagged Kalahar and this reporter down earlier this week and expressed his concerns (and feelings).

Peterson said the growing sedimentation in the wetlands is causing the loss of upstream farm acres. He said the cattail-choked wetlands slow the flow as well, and smell rotten from the accumulation of decaying vegetation.

Landowners are only asking to restore the flow capacity that existed before, Peterson explained. He said there had once been a channel at the outlet.

An engineering report by ICS of Mankato found that at some point in the past, a channel was dug through the center of the wetland complex to aid in drainage. “However, the open channel was never legally established and has not been maintained to provide adequate drainage,” according to the report.

Sedimentation, the restriction of the culvert size at the crossing of 820th Avenue, dense cattail growth, and gravel accumulation from road overtopping are all factors, according to the report.

The petition to open the channel seeks to return the channel to the legal grade present before the sediment build up. It would not deepen the channel, according Seth Sparks, drainage management director for Renville County.

He said the petition was filed with the anticipation that Limbo Creek could be returned to the Public Waters Inventory.

If Limbo Creek is returned to the Public Waters Inventory, the proposed drainage project would require a permit from the Minnesota DNR, he explained.

Kalahar, who is retired from a career with the Renville County Soil and Water Conservation District, said it can take a thick skin to do conservation work. He is aware of the frustrations of the landowners, but also pointed out that conservation programs have helped many of those with lands in the natural floodplain.

The reality of it all, he said, is that it takes citizens playing the role of local watch dogs to protect waterways such as Limbo Creek. Otherwise, he said the tendency for state and local government units is to allow for more drainage.

“If you can’t protect Limbo Creek, you can’t protect anything,” he said.