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### Area dune restoration has multiple benefits

November 8, 2013  
CHRISTIE BLECK - Journal Staff Writer (cbleck@miningjournal.net) , The Mining Journal

HARVEY - Dune grasses can do more than improve a habitat. They can help make snowy highways a lot more passable.

The recently completed Lake Superior Dune Restoration and M-28 Wind Break Project involves the use of native grass species and trees to control erosion and create wind breaks. This undoubtedly will help travelers who drive along two sections of M-28 next to the Lake Superior shore - an area that has been closed at times due to drifting snow.

The project includes about two miles of coastline with public access turnouts at several sites. M-28 runs adjacent to the top of the dunes in these areas, and in some spots there are severely eroding bluffs.

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The project complements previous work completed by the Michigan Department of Transportation and furthers the goals of the Marquette County Hazard Mitigation Plan. Because it aims to improve road safety, the Superior Watershed Partnership and Marquette County received a grant of \$94,670 through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Pre-Disaster Hazard Mitigation Program.

The project also is a priority in the state-approved Chocolay River Watershed Management Plan. Protecting the area from weather, natural threats such as invasive species and public misuse is important as the township anticipates more challenging situations. These include the effects of climate change, which might include more severe storms, waves and droughts, said Kelly Drake Woodward, planning director and zoning administrator for Chocolay Township,

"The dunes are impacted by and also impact the effects of storms - where they are not stabilized, they will actively shift with wind and wave action, but where they are stabilized, they can help protect property from damage from wind and waves," Woodward said.

The planting of trees and other native plants will provide erosion control and direct the public to specified areas to help stabilize the dunes and keep them as a scenic and natural resource, Woodward said.

That's consistent, she noted, with the intent of the township's Lake Superior Shoreline/Dune Protection Overlay District in its zoning ordinance.

Geri Grant, senior planner with the Superior Watershed Partnership, said the SWP was involved in the project by coordinating more than 100 community volunteers to work at the sites.

"We removed invasive plants," Grant said. "Spotted knapweed was the most common invasive plant out there."

As many people involved in restoration work will point out, this alien plant can be devastating to a landscape. Grant said spotted knapweed will outcompete the native vegetation in the area, and will completely overrun it.

Grant said spotted knapweed, which also isn't a valuable food source for wildlife, is spread at MDOT sites by travelers.

"They're carrying seeds on their cars, or wherever they've been," she explained.

Native vegetation is much better for a habitat, including people's yards, Grant stressed.

"They're more adapted to this area," she said. "They provide a better food source for animals and birds."

The native dune grasses planted in the project were transplanted from other sites to bare areas at the site, she said.

"So that way we didn't have to spend money to bring in new grass," Grant said, "It does very well transplanting, because you're getting it in the ground right away."

Not only is the Great Lakes coastal dunes habitat threatened by invasive plants, recreational use also can cause damage, she said.

To combat this problem, Grant said MDOT has designated areas where the public can access the beach.

"And that really limits the damage when people walk down to the beach," Grant said. "They're not trampling near the dunes."

Woodward said people harm the dunes when they drive their off-road vehicles on them and tear up the native grasses that help hold the dunes in place.

"They harm them when they avoid existing pathways and similarly harm the vegetation," Woodward said. "The trees make it harder for people to abuse the dunes."

Grant also said she believes wind breaks are important because they help stabilize the dunes and keep snow (and sand) off the road, she said. The trees planted along M-28 during the project were mostly red pines with a few jack pines.

"We do get shutdowns on 28 pretty often because of that happening," Grant noted.

Woodward acknowledged when the trees are grown, they will block portions of the view from the road to the water. However, there will still be areas with clear viewing for people who want to experience the habitat from their vehicles.

There is room for improvement, Woodward said.

"We need to improve access to these areas for people with disabilities," she said. "It is one of the greatest attractions in our township, along with our picturesque rural landscapes."

Woodward said she expects future projects would include performing more of the same actions if previous efforts aren't sufficient, plus spreading the word with private landowners about taking similar steps to protect this resource on the properties.

"This project should serve as a model for private property owners," she said.

However, the project's main goal, Grant acknowledged, is to protect native habitat along the shoreline.

"It's the gateway to Marquette," Grant said, "and a lot of people are stopping here."

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