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Story County watersheds to be monitored for changes in quality over several years

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For the second consecutive year, Prairie Rivers of Iowa, in partnership with Story County Conservation and the city of Ames, has installed two water quality monitoring devices to collect data that will eventually be used to gauge the quality of local watershed areas in the county. The two devices are located in Squaw Creek near Lincoln Way in Ames and in the East Indian Creek near S-27, north of Maxwell.

The overall project is to use funding from the Iowa Department of Agriculture to monitor water quality in the South Skunk River Watershed, which includes smaller watersheds such as Squaw Creek, according to Kayla Hasper, Prairie Rivers of Iowa Watershed Coordinator. The program, called a water quality initiative grant, is offered to gauge water quality in Iowa watersheds by installing conservation practices on the landscape with local farmers, Hasper said.

“So we have been installing these practices in watersheds and wanted to really have an awareness of the change in water quality from those practices,” Hasper said.

Along with finding out of the practices are creating positive changes in water quality, Hasper said that it also gives them a way of raising awareness about current statistics in the watershed.

Even though monitoring of watersheds is taking place in various places in Iowa, the kind of monitoring taking place here is unique because of the type of sampler being used, according to Hasper.

“As far as installing the water quality monitors that are an automated sampler, that is just for our project,” Hasper said.

Hasper said that they chose to use those samplers because they needed to know what the current results were for the nutrient bacteria levels were in the watershed and these provided those results.

“We would like to show change in the watershed, so without having a sampler to actually take the results, we have no idea what changes we’re making,” Hasper said.

The testing began in 2016, and the numbers recorded during the first year, along with the results that are found over the next few years, will be used as a baseline for comparison with the results that are found over a longer period of time. According to Hasper, this project could take several years, if not decades to complete, if it is ever actually completed.

“We’ll continue doing the water quality monitoring for numerous years to come. These are a long-term investment that the county and city has made,” Hasper said. “Ideally, we just keep monitoring forever because this isn’t something that is a short-term problem or a short-term solution, this is something we’re going to be working on for very far into the future.”

Even though the project has no specific end date, the data collected will be monitored as they come in. The analysis is being done at the State Certified Lab in Ames before being sent out to invested parties.

Christina Murphy, assistant director of water and pollution control, said the city approved taking part in the water quality project because of where Ames sits within the watershed area.

“The city of Ames is the lower part of the Squaw Creek watershed and so we have a vested interest in the water quality that comes out of the Squaw Creek because it impacts us,” Murphy said.

Murphy said that is also considered a partnership with other cities that would like to see improvements in area watersheds.

The monitors will stay in place until October, when they are removed to protect the devices from freezing water conditions. Each spring, the monitors will be replaced in the watershed to resume testing.