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Northern Grain Belt Project

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PORTS & TERMINALS

New 'Northern Grain Belt' Statistical Port Project Advances

MAY 13, 2022 • BY DAVID MURRAY

Now that the Corn Belt Ports in the Quad Cities area has successfully established itself as a new statistical port district, setting the stage for further public and private investment and development, another grouping of counties, ports and other entities on the Upper Mississippi River is also seeking to become a statistical port district, to be dubbed the Northern Grain Belt Port Statistical Area. The new areas would stretch from Red Wing, Minn., south to Prairie du Chien, Wis., and would embrace both banks of the Mississippi River.

The Corn Belt Ports were federally recognized as port statistical areas in 2020-21; the area includes the Mississippi River Ports of Eastern Iowa and Western Illinois, the Mid-America Port Commission and the Illinois Waterway Ports and Terminals.

Becoming a port statistical area can aid an inland port region in marketing itself to investors and customers by consolidating port and terminal data under one umbrella. It also helps greatly in applying for federal and state grants.

The 11 counties and municipalities that would make up the new statistical district are currently passing resolutions to form and join it. On May 3, for example, the city of Prairie du Chien, Wis., passed a resolution in favor of the new port project. "This is exactly like the process that was followed with the Upper Mississippi River Ports (Iowa & Illinois), the Illinois Waterways Ports and the Mid-America Port Commission in 2020 and 2021," said Robert Sinkler, former commander of the Rock Island Engineer District and a tireless advocate of those statistical districts.



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Scientist Is Key Figure

Dr. Anshu Singh is a key figure in both the Corn Belt Ports and the new effort. She is the first graduate of Western Illinois University's Large River Ecosystem Ph.D. program, and she currently serves as chief of environmental services for Riverside Global, a "non-traditional water solutions company" founded by Sinkler. With more than 20 years of experience in large aquatic ecosystems, analyzing and interpreting surface water quality issues, Singh also serves as the sustainability and conservation director for the Corn Belt Ports.

Singh said the process of forming the new statistical district could be complete by October. The non-federal co-sponsor of the new district is the Mississippi River Regional Planning Commission. Local agriculture groups like the Wisconsin and Minnesota Corn Growers are also strong supporters. Singh said getting the resolutions on the county agendas can take time, but there is strong support once it comes up for discussion. "A lot of the board members of the counties that are passing resolutions are also corn growers themselves," Singh said.

During her Ph.D. program, she conducted research at Nahant Marsh, one of the largest urban wetlands on the Upper Mississippi River. In addition to scientific studies, her research work contributed to an important conservation effort in the Quad Cities that also had implications for site assessment and remediation at historically contaminated sites located along the Mississippi River corridor.

Singh manages Riverside's water quality and lake/stream restoration projects, as well as site investigations and review of federal environmental databases. She has been particularly active in addressing serious ecological issues from sedimentation and habitat loss to nutrient runoff and pollution. She is also the current chair of the Southeast Iowa Chapter of the Soil and Water Conservation Society.

"Really, Dr. Singh is the brains behind our operation," Sinkler told *The Waterways Journal*. "She should be covered more in the waterway community." Singh was recently profiled in the *Mason County (Ill.) Democrat*, where she said the Corps of Engineers' Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP) would fit perfectly into plans for the Corps to environmentally mitigate lock and dam expansion plans as older locks are expanded to 1,200 feet to accommodate modern tows. NESP just received a shot of new funding as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act—its first substantial funding in 15 years.

She recalls that in 1986, Congress passed the Upper Mississippi River Management Act, which declared the Upper Mississippi System to be a nationally significant ecosystem and officially authorized the establishment of the Environmental Management Program.

"You can't just have the economic benefit without the environmental restoration," Singh told *The Waterways Journal*. "You have to have both. When all that construction [on locks and dams] is happening, it has to happen in a sustainable way."