

Wizards
Fantastic Beasts
 come to the Arlee
 Story Page 4

Ports
Singh hired to head
Corn Belt efforts
 Story Page 6

Changes
 Baptist minister
 becomes rabbi
 Story Page 6

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Mason County's Oldest Business - Est. 1849

The Mason County Democrat, Wednesday, May 11, 2022, Page 6

LIFESTYLES

Port projects here will enhance ecology & economy



BY WENDY MARTIN

dentials.

New attention is being given to the Illinois River and it is hoped that projects designed to mitigate current problems and assist with ecosystem restoration will benefit Mason and Fulton counties.

Dr. Anshu Singh has been tapped to serve as Sustainability and Conservation Director for the Corn Belt Ports area which includes the Illinois River.

The Corn Belt Ports Team was looking for an experienced environmental scientist who had a solid background in agriculture, and very strong water quality cre-

Corn Belt Ports Director of Operations Chris Smith said team wanted an individual who was recognized as a leader in large watersheds and ecosystems, who had a strong agriculture commodity exchange background, and someone who understood the national significance of the region to the national and global supply chains.

They found that person in Dr. Singh who was the first graduate of Western Illinois University's Large River Ecosystem Ph. D program.

Modernization

As the focus continues on modernizing the navigation system with larger 1200-foot chambers at the aging locks and dams and other improvements, Singh's job will be to help direct those efforts in an environmentally sustainable fashion.

This approach fits hand-in-glove with the US Army Corps of Engineers' Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program (NESP) which was recently funded as part of the new federal Infrastructure Bill.

Although the Corn Belt Ports encompass a three-state area, Singh recently talked to the Democrat about how NESP projects might impact residents of Mason and Fulton counties.

"In this area and especially with Central Illinois, it's my priority to get more projects. And my projection is that every Central and North Central Illinois County on the Illinois Waterway should get at least three ecosystem restoration projects on average in the next 15 years from multiple programs," Singh said.

Eco and economic

"When you have a restoration project, you not only improve the ecosystem, but also boost economic activity," Dr. Singh said.

Expanding the locks will increase barge traffic, so Singh expects that one large project for the Havana area will be to improve barge fleeting areas along with floodplain and backwater restoration.

With more and more focus on climate change and the environment, programs like NESP are getting more attention.

This is the first time in 15 years there has been construction funding for NESP.

"In the next 15 years we anticipate more than \$1 billion in additional natural infrastructure investment from several projects, and well over a dozen projects on the larger Illinois River and Waterway," Singh said.

Future focus

Retired U. S. Army Col. Robert A. Sinkler, who was instrumental in the creation of the Corn Belt Ports, added that he believed that mitigation projects and ecosys-

tem restoration projects are likely where the largest investment in new funds will go.

Sinkler noted that the Central and North Central areas of Illinois along the Illinois River are projected to be the largest growth areas in waterborne commerce based upon a recent State of Illinois Marine Transportation System Planning study.

"We just want to make sure that we're taking a comprehensive, balanced view and managing our Illinois waterway and the natural water resources so that we can address a wide variety of needs and requirements," he said.

This could include helping to increase commercial harvesting of Asian Carp, for example.

"That's just naturally aligned with port activity," Sinkler said.

Sustainable

It was also noted that few other port organizations in the country

"When you have a restoration project, you not only improve the ecosystem, but also boost economic activity,"

—Dr. Anshu Singh

have a Director of Sustainability, a focus that is gaining national visibility as addressing climate change becomes an increasingly important issue.

"The Corn Belt Ports is a unique organization in that way, and it indicates the commitment to preserve and protect the ecological integrity of our rivers," Singh said.

The Corn Belt Ports will be competing on a national level with the likes of the Everglades, they said.

Mason and Fulton counties are two of the ten counties that make up the Illinois Waterway Port Statistical Area that is part of the multi-state Corn Belt Ports service area.

The creation of the Corn Belt Ports brought recognition to the fact that this area ranks in the top 50 leading ports in the country in terms of overall tonnage loaded and unloaded at their ports and terminals.

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