

# A small, troubled, Henry Ford-created lake in Wayne County is getting a makeover



**Keith Matheny**

Detroit Free Press

Hear this story

[View Comments](#)

AD

0:19

SKIP



Despite appearances, no one is building the Great Wall of Westland along the shores of Nankin Lake.

Those long, huge, synthetic bags — stacked up to 20 feet high — are filled with sediments, weeds and muck being dredged out of the impoundment lake on

the middle branch of the Rouge River: an effort to transform the area from a poor habitat choked with invasive species to a better water body for fish and recreation.

The Nankin Lake restoration is being funded through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, through funds appropriated by Congress to the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. The funds are used to address so-called "Areas of Concern," problem spots from generations of industrial activity or other environmental or water quality degradation.

Contractors have been removing 600 to 900 cubic yards of sediment and other materials from Nankin Lake daily since work began last month, said John Gundry, landscape designer with Wayne County Parks.

Upon completion, crews expect to remove about 47,500 cubic yards of sediment, creating an additional 3 acres of open water habitat, an acre of deeper-water habitat about 12 feet deep; 1.4 acres of fish spawning sites, including 20 fish habitat structures made from felled trees and boulder clusters; a half-acre marsh for pike spawning and amphibians; nearly 6 acres of phragmites and other invasive plant species removed, with native plant species planted; and improved river flows.



"People were walking across the lake; that's how much sediment was filled in there," Gundry said. "Now canoes and kayaks will be able to float. It will be a much different situation, from 2 inches of water to 12 feet of water."

The first dam creating an impoundment on the Rouge River's middle branch, perhaps going back to the 1800s, was to power a grist mill, grinding grains. "It would have been one of the old, turning, wooden wheels," Gundry said.

Then Henry Ford, circa 1921, upgraded the dam to provide hydropower for his rapidly expanding automotive empire, creating the approximately 10-acre lake. Sediment has built up behind the dam over generations since, slowing its flows in spots, at times, down to a trickle.

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, funded through congressional appropriation, has provided \$283 million to \$475 million annually since 2010 for environmental improvement projects throughout the Great Lakes

region, helping alleviate chronic problems to the lakes and their tributaries from long-term industrial pollution, development or other impairments.

## **Get the Coronavirus Watch newsletter in your inbox.**

Updates on how the coronavirus is affecting your community and the nation

Delivery: Varies

Your Email

Wayne County has received grants through the initiative totaling more than \$9 million since 2016, used on projects throughout the Rouge River system, one of the most urbanized large rivers systems in the Midwest, flowing into the Detroit River and on into Lake Erie. Projects include the installation of a more natural "fishway" around a dam at the old Henry Ford estate in Dearborn, allowing fish species to better migrate upriver; and the creation of more natural fish resting and breeding habitat locations in a portion of the Rouge long ago converted to a man-made concrete channel behind Greenfield Village property.



"It's about the habitat and working toward the removal of those beneficial use impairments — allowing citizens to experience the river system in their backyard," said John O'Meara, habitat restoration manager with the nonprofit Alliance of Rouge Communities, a regional group that helps identify and manage the areas of concern for Great Lakes Restoration Initiative assistance.

"It will allow for the plant and wildlife species to reestablish, and/or not be forced to move out because of the changing conditions. When you add it all up with all of the other projects going on — on the Rouge River and on other rivers and portions of the Great Lakes — those all combine to address these long-term, historical impairments."

**More:** Michigan's poorer, minority neighborhoods become 'sacrifice zones' for increased pollution

**More:** EPA: No level of nonstick PFAS compounds in water is safe for public health

A barge with a large augur tool is able to suck sediment, weeds and other material out of Nankin Lake. The muck is then stored in the large bags on the lakeshore, porous enough to allow the water to flow out and back into the water body. Once dry enough, the material is shipped to local landfills, likely for use as capping material as landfill cells are closed, Gundry said.

Wayne County is already working on other restoration projects utilizing Great Lakes Restoration Initiative money, including the creation and improvement of forest, meadow and wetland habitats at Colonial Park and Venoy Dorsey Park in the Rouge River watershed.



"The environmental piece is definitely something I'm passionate about, and I think it's an equitable use of our resources to contribute to a well-functioning community," Gundry said.

As Nankin Lake is improved, the county also is installing more defined parking spaces, a trailhead and wheelchair-accessible paddle boat launch.

"It's great to have the habitat (improvements), but we want to get people out there using it, getting excited about it and saying, 'We want more of this work,'"  
" Gundry said.