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Cities join an XL-ent project

■ Businesses, too, get on bandwagon

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OWATONNA — "Reduce, reuse and recycle" will take on a whole new meaning at the Owatonna Waste Water Treatment Plant. Business leaders are making a greater commitment to reduce discharged water and heavy metals found in the water through a new program called Project XL.

Owatonna and Blooming Prairie government leaders, nine Owatonna and Blooming Prairie business leaders, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency gathered together and signed an agreement putting the program in place Wednesday.

The project is the first of its kind, combining the efforts of both business and regulatory agencies in environmental problem-solving ventures.

The five-year pilot project is part of EPA's Project XL (excellence and leadership) for Communities program and will be carried out by the cities of Owatonna and Blooming Prairie, and up to nine local industrial facilities.

"The status of any community's water, air, and ground environment is a direct reflection of how well the private and public sectors work together," said Dennis J. Sershen, Steele County XL Project Chairperson. "The Steele County XLC project is a great example of what a community can do for itself when it works towards the creation of a private-public partnership to establish and attain environmental excellence and leadership goals."

Sershen has been working with the EPA and the MPCA since 1986 to create the Project XL with the goal of changing the way businesses are regulated by the EPA and the MPCA.

Instead of fining industries for non-compliance, the two regulatory agencies will work with business in a partnership agreement. The two agencies will help business by offering advice and sharing information.

Press photo by Michael McLoone

Dennis Sershen, Safety & Environmental Coordinator for Truth Hardware, signs an agreement called Project XL on Wednesday. The agreement is the first of its kind, and includes nine Owatonna and Blooming Prairie businesses. With the help of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency the agreement will help the way businesses are regulated by the EPA and the MPCA.

very, very long road."

Industry only contributes 95 percent of the contaminants reaching the waste water treatment plant, Sershen said. Many companies in Owatonna are very conscious about water usages and water contamination.

Cybex is one such company. It's been trying to control its waste water and water contaminants for 13 years. The company makes exercise equipment.

The company is helping other companies who have joined the project reduce waste water and water contaminants, Cybex's president Jeff Hollister said. The company no longer stores equipment outside and has purchased self-containment equipment for its water. The equipment recycles the water and the chemicals the company uses.

The nine businesses participating in the project — primarily metal finishers — have agreed to:

- reduce metals in waste water discharged into the local waste water treatment plant
- reduce water use
- minimize storm water runoff at each facility
- work with the Owatonna treatment plant to develop educational materials on the importance of reducing storm water entering the sewer system

In return, EPA and MPCA will provide regulatory flexibility that allows Owatonna to:

- reduce required frequency of monitoring for metals when discharge goals are met
- eliminate monitoring for pollutants that have not been discharged in the past two years
- change regulatory limits on pollutants to allow the facilities to reduce their water use without allowing an increase in amounts discharged
- allow certain violations to be posted on the MPCA Web site instead of published in the local newspaper

"This innovative project shows the importance of partnerships and working cooperatively to achieve a common goal," said EPA Regional Administrator Francis X. Lyons. "This is the first XL project of this kind and EPA hopes that it will become a model for other communities."

Only time will tell if the project will work, Owatonna Waste Water Treatment Plant manager Dean Nelson said.

The project is a continuation of a pretreatment program already in place. The program requires companies to report to Nelson. Nelson keeps files on the discharge and reports the findings to the MPCA