

The Grand River Dam Authority has paid landowners more than \$2 million in recent months to move livestock away from the Illinois River and now Grand Lake, GRDA officials said Wednesday. The state-owned utility expects to be reimbursed the expense through grants, said GRDA Vice President for Scenic Rivers and Water Quality Ed Fite, but in the meantime itâ€™s been able to initiate a new phase in its efforts to reverse the effects of pollution in the Grand and Illinois watersheds. This phase involves obtaining conservation easements along sensitive waterways under GRDA management. Conservation easements are in this case between the GRDA and landowners, to restrict usage of land within the easements. Fite said this includes taking agricultural land out of production, keeping livestock out and forgoing all construction. The initiative has been underway for awhile on the Illinois River, and on Wednesday GRDA regents approved the first easement on Grand Lake. The 237-acre easement by Grant and Donna Victor of Afton is mostly on Horse Creek but also includes some land along the smaller Fly Creek, both near the north end of Grand Lake. GRDA officials said outbreaks of blue green algae over the past decade have been traced to Horse Creek. â€œHorse Creek is just under roughly 50 square miles of drainage,â€• Fite said. â€œWhen you drill down ... it is a perfect sandbox for all of us that like water quality to jump in.â€• You have row crops. You have poultry operations. We have land application of waste from poultry operations. We have commercial fertilization. We also have a publicly owned wastewater treatment plant. The mix is just perfect for us to get in and start trying to hone in what these issues are,â€• Fite said. Fite and Darrell Townsend, vice president for ecosystems and watershed management, said scientists from the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University and Northeastern A&M College will be involved in developing information about where and how pollutants enter Horse Creek. Fite noted that the blue green algae so despised by lake regulars is â€œa huge indication something is out of whack.â€• He pointed out the four serious outbreaks in the past decade have followed

heavy rainfalls, and said he doesn't think it's a coincidence. "That's telling me (rain runoff) is putting a slug of nutrients in the water," he said. The monitoring on Horse Creek, Fite continued, should give scientists an indication whether those nutrients are primarily coming from one or two "point" sources or from many sources. Also on Thursday, the GRDA approved four other conservation easements totaling more than 180 acres along the Illinois River in Adair county. Fite said the GRDA now has conservation easements on almost 2,000 acres adjoining the Illinois, and would like to add several thousand more. The goal is to return the Illinois as much as possible to its natural surroundings. That means letting it rise above its banks when it floods and allowing vegetation to reestablish itself along the river's course. That will not only help filter impurities from runoff but limit erosion, which has become an increasing problem. Fite, who for many years oversaw Illinois River preservation as head of the now-defunct Scenic Rivers Commission, sees current conservation as extensions of work that began almost 40 years ago. "In 1983, there were 200,000 people in the Illinois watershed," he said. "Now there are 700,000. In 2050-60 there will be 1.2-1.4 million. And yet the water quality has actually improved. My hope is we'll be able to say we did the same for the Grand." Featured video: Aerial view of property at 31st and Peoria, where there is a plan for a mixed-use development Randy Krehbiel 918-581-8365 randy.krehbiel@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @rkrehbiel Get Government & Politics updates in your inbox! Stay up-to-date on the latest in local and national government and political topics with our newsletter. Sign up!

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