

Community Leaders Come Out for Madison County Earth Day Clean-Up

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ROXANA/WOOD RIVER - The Madison County Earth Day Clean-Up went “really well,” according to local activist Rusty Wheat.

Wheat explained that the clean-up day invited community members and elected officials to join him on his pick-up routes in Roxana and Wood River. Participants picked up trash off Highway 255 and Poag Road on Saturday, April 20, 2024. The goal was to clean up the roads and raise awareness about trash in the area.

“We didn’t pick up as much as last year, which is a really good thing,” Wheat said. “Last year we picked up over 100 bags and this year I think we got about 75, which is a good sign. I think some things are changing on trash.”

He noted that they had almost 30 participants come out and join the clean-up. The Army ROTC and several elected officials were present. Wheat was pleased to see many community leaders, including State Senator Erica Harriss, State Representative Amy Elik, Roxana Mayor Marty Reynolds, Roxana City Administrator Jason Woody, Roxana

Police Chief Will Cunningham, Madison County Treasurer Chris Slusser, and Madison County Board member Mike Babcock.

“I was very happy with it. More than anything, I was happy that we got the right people there,” Wheat said. “The group photo opportunity showed me that people cared. I pick up trash any day of the week, but the simple fact that we had so many elected representatives there together at one particular time, that meant a lot.”

Over the past year, Wheat has operated as a [one-man Chain Gang](#), picking up trash every week along Illinois Route 143. But while he plans to continue The Chain Gang’s work, he said he will “pull back the reins” on some of his letter-writing and advocacy efforts.

He believes he has found a solution to the trash problem along these roads. According to Wheat, much of the trash that litters this area falls off trucks on their way to the landfill. He said that the netting on the back of these trucks is not enough to keep the trash contained, and a tarp system would be a better answer.

“It’s the netting in the trucks that is failing us,” he said. “By doing my research, I’ve come to the conclusion that that is the solution. Tarps are the solution.”

Wheat said he has seen “a significant difference” in the amount of trash in the past few weeks, ever since the trucks began replacing their nets with finer netting. While he is pleased with this, he hopes the trucking companies and the Madison County Board will join his push to implement tarps.

“I think this is a solution, and it’s up to them. If they want to fix it, they can,” Wheat added. “It’s like I can give you a box of nails and I can give you a hammer, but I can’t make you drive those nails in with the hammer. So it’s up to them. They could fix this solution...They could stop this problem if they wanted to. It’s just a matter of what their will is to get this done.”

As he prepares to step down from some of his advocacy work, Wheat called the Madison County Earth Day Clean-Up his “swan song.” He is pleased with what he has accomplished, and he hopes to see the trucks implement the tarp solution he has outlined to Madison County officials.

“It’s a good thing. I think we’ve finally come to what I see as a remedy to the trash situation,” he said. “I firmly believe that we’ve got the solution, so I am begging board members and Chris Slusser to act on this because it’s going to drive me crazy for the next century if nothing is done and the trash piles up and they continue to hire these outfits out of county, out of state to clean them up.”

If you have questions about Wheat's work or The Chain Gang, you can contact him at 618-670-6804.

