



connect with environmental education. It allows K-12 students a place to come when they're studying stormwater. They can experience the rain garden at work to see firsthand "This is how it operates, this is what it looks like. Particularly after a rain, it's awesome to see how it looks," said Abraham.

In addition to its practical use, the finished rain garden provides a beautiful new space for students to use and take pride in. The administration has plans to provide each class, freshman, sophomore, junior and senior with a section of the rain garden to take ownership of over their time in the school.

The best way to ensure the future of conservation is to get more people involved. The students at West Branch-Rose City Area Schools are no exception. "Our kids are doing great things – this rain garden is one thing they do and educationally we're doing everything we can to teach them about the environment and their impact, and I think they are taking it to heart," said Superintendent Mikulski. High School student Brady Zettle helped build the garden and has seen the connection between the community and the water

quality firsthand. Growing up near agriculture and the river, he understood how important it was to keep pollution out in order to protect the quality of the water. When asked what his favorite part of the project was Zettle said, "Giving back to the community and seeing how we can make this rain garden make the Rifle River a little bit healthier."

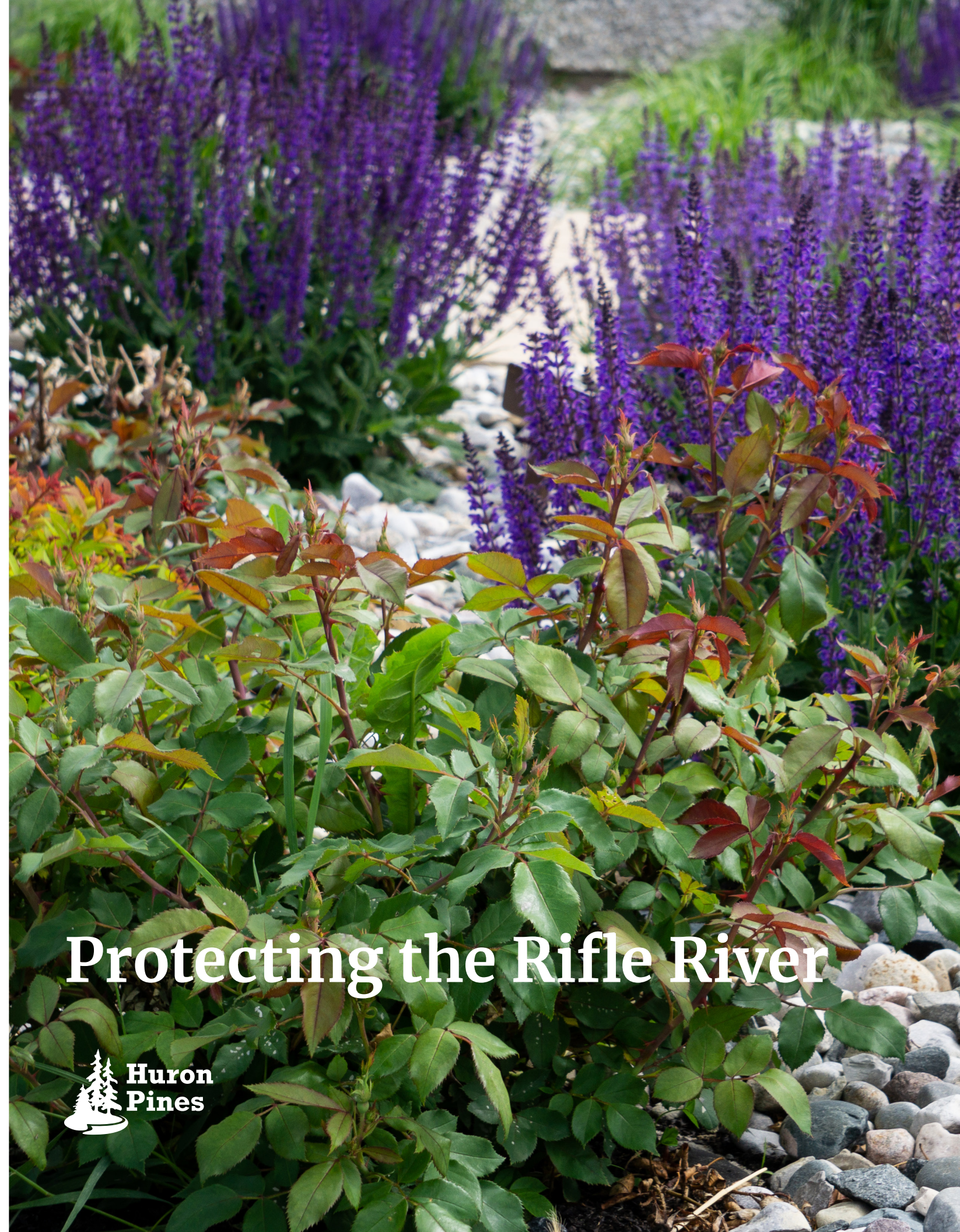
Overall the West Branch and Rose City projects led to the installation of an oil and grit separator in each city, 800 feet of streambank restoration work to reduce erosion in Houghton Creek and the Rifle River and the creation of six rain gardens.



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# Protecting the Rifle River





**Running over 60 miles, with feeder creeks and streams along the way, the Rifle River is the highest quality tributary flowing into the Saginaw Bay. Protecting the water quality in the Rifle River system is critical to ensuring the long-term health of the Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron. Preserving the watershed starts in the communities of West Branch and Rose City. They are the largest population centers in the watershed, which means they are the most impacted by development, infrastructure and use, which can all contribute to added pollution in the Rifle River and Lake Huron.**

“The Rifle River is important to the communities of West Branch and Rose City, not just from an ecological perspective, but from a recreational perspective,” explained Mike Kelly, manager of the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network (WIN), a conservation fund established to protect the Saginaw Bay. “Whether it’s Houghton Creek [in Rose City] or the Rifle River [in West Branch], both support a high-quality fishery that brings people from throughout the state to come and fish for trout.” The Rifle and its tributaries also attract outdoor enthusiasts with opportunities for camping, canoeing, tubing and kayaking. “Protecting those resources is really fundamental and I think important to the economies in those communities.”

With its environmental, economic and recreational impact, preserving the water quality in

West Branch and Rose City was a high-priority for Huron Pines and WIN. Huron Pines had the expertise to assess the cities and create an action plan for water quality protection and WIN was willing to support the project as an early funder. “Here we have an opportunity to go into a community where there was a nearly pristine waterway and work to protect it so we wouldn’t have to come back years later to restore it,” said Kelly. “This was a good opportunity to work with a solid partner to take care of an important resource before it became degraded.”

A key component to projects in both cities was community involvement. From the Rose City, City Council to the West Branch-Rose City Area School District, Huron Pines got to know the people who lived in these communities and cared most about the health of their natural

resources. One aspect of water quality improvements in both cities was to install oil and grit separators that would filter pollution from excess snowmelt and stormwater running off of roads, parking lots and other paved surfaces. Keeping the pollutants out of Houghton Creek and the Rifle River was a big first step in maintaining the purity of the water.

The community was able to get more involved in the additional steps which included river restoration projects to reduce erosion and keep excess sediment from entering the river and the construction of rain gardens to naturally filter stormwater. One of the largest rain garden projects took place at the Ogemaw Heights High School.

West Branch-Rose City School Superintendent, Philip Mikulski explained that the rain garden project was about more than building a garden, it was a teaching opportunity that spanned across elementary, middle and high school classes, and involved a great deal of community support. Two of the major garden construction days took place in 95-degree summer heat. But the community showed up to support the effort. “It was a ton of work, and it wasn’t just students

and staff. It was a ton of community members,” said Debra Abraham, Secretary to the Superintendent, who was very involved in the entire process and helped with construction. “It was hard work, but it was great.”

***Educationally we’re doing everything we can to teach them about the environment and their impact, and I think they are taking it to heart.***

***Philip Mikulski, Superintendent***

Even though the rain garden was built at the high school, stormwater and water quality lessons were taught throughout the district. “Different teachers approached it in different ways,” said Abraham. She saw the impact on students of all ages. Even the elementary school students she said, “If you run into them in town, or they come out [to the high school] say, ‘We learned about this in school.’”

The vision is for the rain garden to be an ongoing opportunity for students and teachers to

