Thames River Basin Partnership

Partners in Action Quarterly Report

Spring 2021 Volume 58

The Thames River watershed includes the Five Mile, French, Moosup, Natchaug, Pachaug, Quinebaug, Shetucket, Willimantic, and Yantic Rivers and all their tributaries. We're not just the "Thames main stem."

Greetings from the Thames River Basin Partnership. Once again this quarter our partners have proven their ability to work cooperatively on projects compatible with the TRBP Plan of Work and in support of our common mission statement to share organizational resources and to develop a regional approach to natural resource protection. I hope you enjoy reading about these activities as much as I enjoy sharing information about them with you. For more information on any of these updates, just click on the blue website hyperlinks in this e-publication, but be sure to come back to finish reading the rest of the report.

Jean Pillo, Watershed Conservation Project Manager
Eastern Connecticut Conservation District
And TRBP Coordinator

Special Presentation

If you missed the winter TRBP 2021 meeting, you missed a special presentation featuring Ashley Helton, Associate Professor at UCONN, who presented on her current research, "Can Watershed Landuse Legacies Inform Nitrogen Management?" This multi-partner effort includes the UCONN Center for Landuse Education and Research, USGS and consultant Paul Stacey from Footprints in the Sand. Legacy nitrogen is nitrogen that was applied to the land or into ground water from past land uses. Legacy nitrogen may travel through the water table at different rates depending on soil composition and other factors, and then be reintroduced to surface water some distance away and many years later as the groundwater resurfaces as springs or seeps. Nitrogen loading from forested land would normally be minimal unless the land was used previously for agriculture and subsequently reforested. Under these circumstances, the lag time for the agricultural-associated nitrogen may confuse computer models, which assess current land use rather than previous land uses. A product of this research will be a geospatial vulnerability analysis to inform land use decision makers.
To see Ashley's presentation, please use this link. https://thamesriverbasinpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Helton_WatershedLegacies_2021.pdf

TRBP Updates

The TRBP Facebook page is up to 174 followers, up from 135 in January. Updates are posted at least once a week. If you are not a follower of TRBP on Facebook, it is never too late to get on board. Click this link and then either "like" or "follow" the page. https://www.facebook.com/Thames-River-Basin-Partnership-766778116778125/

The current TRBP Plan of Work will sunset in 2021. At the quarterly meeting, partners discussed potential revisions to the new 3-year Plan of Work including the updated Long Island Sound CCMP, the Governor's Report on Climate Change, Sustainable CT and inclusivity. Eric Thomas and Lois Bruinooge volunteered to participate in a TRBP PoW committee. The TRBP Plan of Work committee will seek input from other partners prior to updating the Plan of Work. All partners are requested to review the current TRBP Plan of Work and send comments or feedback to Jean.Pillo@Comcast.net.

The TRBP Floating Workshop 2021 was held on June 18th. The theme of the workshop was Coastal Embayments of the Eastern Connecticut Shoreline. The workshop included a paddle in a protected area along the Groton coastal region. Workshop topics included the Baker Cove Water Advisory Committee, eelgrass restoration, and coastal water quality indicators. Project Oceanology conducted hands-on activities, including water quality testing and seining for marine life, to engage workshop participants. Jean Pillo of TRBP presented on shellfish that inhabit coastal CT and discussed their roles in the marine ecosystem. To view a story map summary of the TRBP Floating Workshop #21, use this link.

HELP WANTED: ECCD is looking for someone with WordPress and HTML knowledge that can manage the plugins and themes used within the website to correct compatibility issues when WordPress updates. Contact Jean.Pillo@Comcast.net for more information.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Project Summaries

The 2014 Farm Bill included new ways for the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to innovate, leverage additional contributions, offer impactful solutions and engage more participants. One such program is the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The purpose of the program is to promote coordination with partners to deliver conservation assistance to agricultural producers and landowners. This is done by providing technical assistance through agreements and direct funding for conservation practices. Through Thames River Basin Partnership, partners meet to discuss ways to collaborate on projects like these. TRBP is conducting outreach for three Regional Conservation Partnership Programs.

FY14/15 (State level funding): The Last Green Valley is lead partner in this $400,000 NRCS RCPP project entitled **Improving Soil Health and Water Quality in the Thames River Watershed**. The project addresses two national priorities (soil health and water quality), and all five Connecticut state priorities (water quality degradation, soil erosion, soil quality degradation, degraded plant conditions and livestock production limitations). Through the TLGV RCPP, four collaborating partners are implementing soil health conservation practices on cropland in eastern Connecticut's Thames River Watershed. Funding to implement the practices is provided by Natural Resources Conservation Service through its Environmental Quality Incentive Program

(EQIP). The long-term objective of the project is to improve soil health, as well as edge-of-field and in-stream water quality by decreasing nutrient and turbidity levels.

Project update: A portion of the technical assistance funding was applied to updating the Muddy Brook and Little River Water Quality Improvement Plan (Woodstock, Putnam, Pomfret, Thompson). Funding for the TLGV RCPP expired on June 25, 2021. A full project update is pending the final report.

FY15/16 (State level funding): The University of Connecticut is the recipient and lead partner in an RCPP project entitled **Path to Reduce Pathogens in CT Agricultural Runoff (PATH)**. This $669,000 NRCS RCPP is focused on reducing high bacteria levels in Connecticut's rivers and shellfish beds, which is, in part, caused by runoff from agricultural operations. To address water quality degradation, ten conservation partners are collaborating to achieve the objectives of the project: University of Connecticut, Eastern Connecticut Conservation District, The Last Green Valley, Inc., CT Department of Agriculture Bureau of Aquaculture, CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, CT Sea Grant, Stonington Shellfish Commission, CUSH, Inc. (Clean Up Sound & Harbors), the Thames River Basin Partnership and UCONN Extension.

Project update: ECCD, in partnership with NRCS, is working on conservation plans for several farms in the watershed, with recommendations for practices to improve manure storage and management. Some of the practices include manure storage facilities and bedded pack facilities requiring Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMPs). All the financial assistance available through the project has been expended, but technical assistance is still available. A portion of the technical assistance funding has been applied to updating the Muddy Brook and Little River Water Quality Improvement Plan (Woodstock, Putnam, Pomfret, Thompson). To understand producer reluctance to apply to NRCS for financial assistance, UCONN's Anita Morzillo surveyed farmers.

FY16/17 (National level funding): The Last Green Valley (TLGV) was awarded $6,144,000 through NRCS' RCPP for **Accelerating the Pace of Conservation in the Southern New England Heritage Forest**. The Southern New England Heritage Forest (SNEHF) is a uniquely positioned forest corridor stretching north along the Connecticut and Rhode Island border to the Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts. A remarkable partnership of non-profit organizations and regional, state and municipal agencies is offering private woodland owners a suite of NRCS tools for sound management and forestry conservation practices through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Permanent protection through easements under the Healthy Forests Reserve Program is also available. To accelerate the pace of conservation in SNEHF, the project serves as a "conservation pipeline" of forest and bird habitat plans, EQIP practices and HFRP easements on private forestlands.

Project update: The Last Green Valley (TLGV), the MassConn Sustainable Forest Partnership (MassConn) and the Northern Rhode Island Conservation District (NRICD) recently promoted an opportunity for woodland landowners of ten or more acres to obtain forest management plans with bird habitat assessments. This resulted in 5500 acres of forestland under contract for forest management plans! NRCS is conducting due diligence prior to closing on permanent easements on another 1100 acres of forested land. For more information, visit the TLGV website.

For more information about USDA NRCS RCPP opportunities, please visit the NRCS website at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/farmbill/rcpp.

Partner Reports

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service reports that its field offices are staffed at up to 50% employees and partners and the state office is staffed at 25% of employees and partners. They were not open to customers in April 2021 due to the high rates of COVID in the state.

Climate Change - The Biden administration has put together a plan to conserve 30% of the land and water in the United States by 2030. NRCS has been told that it will play a significant role in meeting this goal.

There is additional climate change legislation in the US House of Representatives. The legislation, if passed, would increase funding for financial and technical assistance funds through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program. Currently not permitted, there is also language that would allow producers to buy equipment to implement soil health practices.

The New London County NRCS field office reported that the EQIP, AMA, and CSP application deadlines have passed for the fiscal year. Norwich will fund roughly 25 of 60 applications, with unfunded applications deferred until NRCS receives the FY2022 allocations this fall/winter. Planned projects range from forestry to vegetable, dairy, and mixed livestock operations. On water quality and manure management, Norwich is contracting for two bedded pack and one satellite manure storage structure in Lebanon, a bedded pack facility in North Franklin, and a swine heavy-use area and manure storage in Waterford. There are 62 contracts on the books being implemented, with hopes to construct 2-3 manure storage structures this summer.

An intern started in the Norwich field office on June 6th, and NRCS staff is hoping to facilitate field experiences for her with partners so she can partake in a range of conservation efforts in eastern Connecticut.

The Windham County NRCS field office received 18 round one EQIP applications and staff is currently managing 35 contracts out of their office. A large-scale waste storage facility is planned for installation in summer 2021.

An anaerobic digester to convert cow manure to electricity is being installed in Thompson, CT. You can read more about this project at this link. https://aggridenergy.com/dairy-digester-sets-up-fort-hill-farms-for-the-future/

The Eastern Connecticut Conservation District (ECCD), in partnership with the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership (WWP), received a grant from One Tree Planted. Volunteers planted six trees and eleven shrubs on the WWP property located at 28 Bridge Street in Willimantic. The vision for this property, once a brownfield, is to develop it into a high-quality urban waterfront, whitewater park and trail hub.

ECCD was also the recipient of another small grant from the Friends of the National Association of Conservation Districts. The funds from this very competitive grant will be used to develop a 5-year plan for transforming the district's land in Brooklyn, adjacent to the Brooklyn UCONN Agriculture Extension Center, into the Milo Appley Conservation Showcase and Education Center.

ECCD staff are involved with updating the Muddy Brook and Little River Water Quality Improvement Plan. The Muddy Brook/Little River watershed drains portions of Woodstock, Thompson, Pomfret and Putnam, and is an important source water area for 25% of the drinking water supply for the Town of Putnam. The current plan does not meet recently updated NRCS guidelines to qualify under NRCS' National Water Quality Initiative, so the plan update will focus primarily on agricultural non-point source runoff. Funding for the plan update is from multiple sources: A Sourcewater Protection Program being led by the Connecticut Council of Soil and Water Conservation and reappropriated technical assistance funding through the TLGV Soil Health RCPP and the UCONN Path to Reduce Pathogens RCPP.

National Association of Conservation District awarded funding to ECCD, and CT's four other conservation districts, to assist farmers and urban gardeners with conservation projects. This funding will become available in September.

The Eastern Connecticut Stormwater Collaborative, a project led by ECCD with two years of funding from the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, currently has no dedicated funding. ECCD will continue to conduct quarterly meetings, for a limited time, until additional funding is acquired. At the spring meeting of the Collaborative, municipal participants charged with overseeing the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) General Permit were educated about the different water quality parameters they are required to monitor, and why they are a concern to the environment in elevated concentrations. Great discussion followed the presentation.

The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut awarded ECCD funding to install two Green School Yards at schools in Putnam and Windham. This project is in the early stages of development.

Progress continues on the Shewville Dam fishway design in Ledyard. After it was determined that the property where the fishway will be located involves multiple property owners, easements from all three property owners will be required. Fortunately, all three owners have agreed to provide construction and long-term maintenance easements. The Shewville Dam is the last major obstacle to migrating fish swimming upstream from Long Island Sound through the Thames River and Poquetanuck Cove on their way to Amos Lake in Preston, an important historic breeding area for alewife.

A fishway over the Hallville Dam in Preston, was opened for the season in April. Kevin Job from the DEEP fisheries division reported that 198 alewives passed through the fishway in 2021, a record for Hallville. DEEP anticipates fish counts will begin to peak in 2023, but in Kevin's words, "any jump is a good jump."

The four towns of the Niantic River watershed, Montville, Waterford, Salem and East Lyme, are working with ECCD on a project referred to as the Niantic River Four-Town Project (officially the project is called, *Niantic River Watershed 4-Town Bio-Infiltration, Filtration & Water Collection Project*). A suite of stormwater best management practices, including rain gardens, rain barrels, storm drain filter inserts and tree filters, will be implemented. The storm drain filter inserts have been delivered and towns are working with ECCD staff to select the best locations to install them. Rain garden and rain barrel placements are being planned as well.

The Anguilla Brook Watershed Based Plan, a plan to address non-point source pollution impacting water quality in the Anguilla Brook watershed, in the towns of Stonington and North Stonington, has been completed and awaits final approval from CT DEEP and EPA.

The next big project being managed by ECCD, in partnership with CT DEEP, EPA and NRCS, is a large agricultural waste storage and management facility and silage bunker at a dairy farm in Woodstock. The project is underway and involves many components. A description of the project from the farm itself can be watched on a Elm Farm *Farm to Table Market* video Facebook post.

On April 28, 2021, Valleyside Farm gave a demonstration of a manure injector which is used to inject liquid manure into soil to reduce surface runoff of manure. This equipment was purchased for Valleyside Farm with funding by CT DEEP through a US EPA Clean Water Act Section 319 NPS grant.

The Nature Conservancy, Save the Sound and Citizens Campaign for the Environment lined up scientists, practitioners and leaders to share their experiences combating pollution and cleaning up coastal waters around the Sound. These organizations coordinated a workshop series on the theme *of Long Island Sound: Driving Local Actions to Tackle Water Pollution*. The 3-week collaborative workshop series in May 2021 focused on policies, technologies and projects that help tackle bacterial contamination, nitrogen pollution, and marine debris in Long Island Sound's coastal waters. Topics included Fecal Bacteria Pollution, Nitrogen Pollution and Marine Debris and Plastic Pollution.

CT Department of Energy and Environmental Protection announced the recipients of the inaugural round of grants for the Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Control on Lakes, Ponds and Rivers program, funded through fee on boats registered in Connecticut. In eastern Connecticut, recipients included the Amos Lake Association, Inc., awarded $21,504 to control Variable Water Milfoil and develop a Lake Management Plan for Amos Lake. The Town of Bolton, Town of Vernon and Friends of Bolton Lakes were awarded $24,910.50 for Aquatic Invasive Plant Management in the Bolton Lakes. The Bolton Lakes flow into the Hop River, a tributary to the Willimantic River. The Town of Coventry was awarded $50,000 for Hydrilla Treatment and a Tuber Density Monitoring Research Program for Coventry Lake. The towns of Mansfield & Coventry CT were awarded $6,940 to Developing a Long-Term Strategy and Educational Campaign for Fanwort Management in Eagleville Lake, an impoundment of the Willimantic River.

CT DEEP is pleased to announce that the Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition (OSWA) 2021 Grant Application is now available. Electronic submittals must be received by September 30, 2021.

Awards for the recipients of the 2020 grant round can be found at this link. The 2020 grants will support protecting through preservation over 1000 acres of land in the eastern part of Connecticut in the towns of East Lyme, Groton, Ledyard, Montville, and Pomfret.

CT DEEP also announced that the Urban Green and Community Garden (UGCG) 2021 Grant Application is now available. Electronic submittals must be received by September 30, 2021.

The Last Green Valley Volunteer Water Quality Program is back in action in 2021. Teams are continuing to collect stream temperature data as part of an effort to document cold water stream habitat. The pathogen monitoring team will be following up after data collected in 2020 indicated a source(s) of *E. coli* contamination in Bungee Brook. Bungee Brook drains part of Eastford and Woodstock. Seven sampling locations in the Bungee Brook watershed, plus two in the Still River up- and downstream of the Bungee Brook confluence, have been selected to track down sources of bacterial contamination. More monitoring stations will be added later in the season if the data supports the need for more information.

Project Oceanology has applied for funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to fund an outdoor learning alliance. The program has been awarded funding and will include planning, building, and use support of outdoor learning spaces at underperforming/underserved schools in Connecticut's Thames River watershed. Project O will partner with participating schools to offer Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEEs) to teachers and students, and to integrate MWEEs and outdoor learning into school curricula in a way that is sustainable beyond the scope of the grant.

The Connecticut Council on Environmental Quality (Council) released its assessment of the condition of the State's environment. The report, *Environmental Quality in Connecticut*, was delivered to Governor Lamont, as required by law. It is an unbiased assessment of Connecticut's natural environment, both positive and negative, during the 2020 calendar year. The 2020 Annual Report is designed to be read online to allow use of the navigation buttons to move from section to section within it or to use the index to find topics that interest you the most.

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) had made available for public review and comment the DRAFT Massachusetts combined 2018/2020 Integrated List of Waters ("Integrated Report"), which represents the most recent update on the status of Massachusetts' waters. This report is submitted to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) every two years in fulfillment of the reporting requirements of sections 305(b) (Summary of Water Quality Report) and 303(d) (List of Impaired Waters) of the Clean Water Act (CWA). EPA has approved states combining Integrated Report cycle submissions, and MassDEP coordinated with EPA-Region 1 to seek approval for combining the 2018 and 2020 reporting cycles into one. The draft 2018/2020 Integrated Report is available at this link. The public commenting period ended on May 28, 2021.

The Hamilton Reservoir WBP has been approved by MA DEP. The PDF version including all attachments is publicly available at this link. To download the PDF at the link, you will need to navigate to the second page. The Last Green Valley provided input to this important planning document.

A new CT Conservation Partnership Program (CCPP) was selected for USDA Funding. This partnership establishes a coordinated process by which land trust applicants to DEEP's Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition Grant Program (OSWA) may apply to the federal Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program as a source of match funds. CCPP has been awarded more than $6.7 million by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Administered by Connecticut Land Conservation Council, the program components include technical support from the Connecticut Farmland Trust and Northwest Connecticut Land Conservancy for land trusts applying to ALE for matching funds and a grant program to provide financial assistance to land trusts for due diligence and transaction costs. The five-year program is targeted to commence in late 2022.

News from Municipalities

In partnership with The Last Green Valley Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Program, members of the Lebanon Inland Wetlands Commission are engaged in a study of Goshen Brook. They will be collecting stream water temperature data and participating in the Riffle Bioassessment for Volunteers program seeking information on the health of the brook.

The Woodstock Conservation Commission kicked off its second year of its Pollinator Pathway Initiative by hosting a free online presentation on Pollinators and Plants that Support them. Emily Mays of the Xerces Society was the guest presenter. The presentation was recorded for those unable to attend the online event.

The Eastford Conservation and Historical Preservation Commission conducted outreach on its Pollinator Pathway initiative by tabling a display outside their post office on June 26.

Land Trust Updates

The Wyndham Land Trust recently acquired two properties that add to the 5000 acres of forest and grasslands already protected by the trust in Connecticut's Quiet Corner. The new 86-acre Cartier Preserve is located north of Quarry Road in Woodstock. The new 65-acre Potrzeba Preserve sits a short distance away to the west of Swedetown Road in the northwest corner of Pomfret. Both preserves are part of a large undeveloped area of forested habitat covering several thousand acres that are important for storing carbon and fighting climate change.

The WLT Cartier Preserve rises to over 900 feet in its center and is traversed by a mile-long trail that runs through dense mountain laurel. Penny Foisey led a walk through the Cartier Preserve on June 13 as part of The Last Green Valley's Spring Outdoors event, and the walk was timed to coincide with the bloom of the mountain laurel. Scouts from BSA Troop 27 in Woodstock recently cleared fallen trees and brush along the trail in preparation for the event.

Wyndham Land Trust is participating with Carole Cheah from the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in Windsor to introduce colonies of lady beetles on preserves where hemlocks are threatened by the wooly adelgid. The introduced lady beetles eat the adelgids, and Cheah has shown they drastically reduce the population of the adelgid and are able to reproduce and overwinter.

On May 26, 2021 the New Roxbury Land Trust hosted a presentation on the American Chestnut Tree, featuring Sandy Anagnostakis of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (retried).

If you would like your organization's efforts included in the next edition of the TRBP Partners in Action Report, consider attending one of our quarterly meetings. It includes a TRBP Plan of Work activity reporting session, which is an informal "round the table" discussion of Partner activities. It is a great time to network with like-focused organizations. All meetings begin at 9:30 AM. Generally, the TRBP meets quarterly on the 3rd Tuesday of the month.

Next meeting will be on July 20, 2021, via Zoom. Register for the meeting at this link. https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZEtf-qurTIjE9ykK5EZ1wHydhK09jZfeji_ The Special presentation will feature Jeanne Davies of the Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Area (CTRC&D). She will give us an update on the development of the Air Line Trail State Park Master Plan.

If you are not already on the e-distribution list for this publication, sign on to our TRBP Distribution list http://thamesriverbasinpartnership.org/subscribe, or you can download previous versions of this quarterly publication from the TRBP website http://thamesriverbasinpartnership.org/newsletters.

The Thames River Basin Partnership is a voluntary, cooperative effort to share resources, and strives to develop a regional approach to resource protection. The Partnership is made up of a variety of agencies, organizations, municipalities, educational institutions, companies, and individuals interested in the environmental health of the greater Thames River basin. Partial funding support for FY 21 for TRBP Coordinator time has been provided by The Last Green Valley. Additional sources of funding are being sought to continue the TRBP Coordinator position. Please consider making a donation to the Eastern Connecticut Conservation District and designate it to support the Thames River Basin Partnership Coordinator position.