Restoring Natural Resources in Connecticut's Housatonic River Watershed

Chemicals pollute the Housatonic River

The Housatonic River flows through western Massachusetts and Connecticut and empties into Long Island Sound. From 1932 through 1977, the General Electric Company facility in Pittsfield, Mass., released polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into the Housatonic River environment. The PCBs contaminated the river's water, sediment, riverbanks and floodplain, as well as various species of fish and wildlife.

Officials secure settlements for remediation and restoration

In the fall of 1998, the United States, the State of Connecticut and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts reached a settlement with GE regarding the release of PCBs by the company's facility in Pittsfield, Mass. The consent decree was executed on Oct. 19, 1999, and required GE to clean up and/or pay for the actual remediation of PCB releases from the facility to the Housatonic River.

GE was also required to separately fund the restoration of natural resources. The company paid more than $15 million in damages for injuries caused by the PCB releases. The funds were divided for restoration efforts in each of the states, with $7.5 million earmarked for projects in Connecticut.

The settlement funds are controlled under federal law by natural resource trustees. In this case, a trustee subcouncil for Connecticut was formed, comprising the natural resource trustees from the State of Connecticut and the Department of the Interior (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) and Department of Commerce (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration). The subcouncil determines how the funds obtained in the natural resource damage settlement with General Electric will be used in Connecticut.

Highlights from completed projects:

- 25 acres in New Milford protected and restored by the Northwest Conservation District at the Native Meadows Wildlife Preserve;
- 20-acre Frost property in Sharon protected by the Housatonic Valley Association and the Sharon Land Trust;
- More than 100 acres in Salisbury protected by the Nature Conservancy, the Trustees of Reservations and the Salisbury Association Land Trust;
- 3.5 acres purchased by the Town of Harwinton for recreational access along the Naugatuck River;
- 1-mile bike trail and parking area constructed by the town in New Milford's Sega Meadows Park; and
- 12 acres purchased by the Town of Newtown for recreational access along the Halfway River.

Stantec Consulting

The Housatonic River's natural resources were injured as a result of PCB contamination.

Trustees plan restoration

Trustees began planning for restoration by developing a public participation plan and by holding project scoping meetings.

The Connecticut Trustee's Advisory Group was formed to represent specific regional interest groups including recreational, environmental, planning and governmental organizations in the Housatonic River Basin.

Trustees prepared and finalized a natural resource restoration plan in 2009. In developing the plan, trustees solicited and thoroughly analyzed restoration project ideas and proposals submitted by the public. The public was invited to comment on the plan, which was subsequently adopted in July 2009.

Funding of $7 million was recommended for 27 projects across three restoration categories: aquatic natural resources, riparian and floodplain natural resources, and recreational use of natural resources.

River restoration begins
Implementation of the restoration plan is underway. More than half of the projects have been implemented, and the remaining projects should be underway within the next few months. See above table for completed projects.

Additional restoration projects proposed
Since the actual cost of the aquatic natural resource projects was substantially less than the riparian and recreational use projects, the trustee subcouncil chose to reserve a portion of the original settlement to fund future projects in this category through amendments to the plan. Remaining settlement funds have grown to more than $2 million in an interest-bearing fund.

In January 2013, the subcouncil released an amendment to the restoration plan that recommends funding for an additional seven aquatic restoration projects. The amendment is available for public review and comment under Natural Resources at http://www.ct.gov/deep/site/default.asp.

Several projects would increase habitat for migratory fish, such as river herring, one through the removal of the Pinshop dam in Watertown and another via construction of a bypass channel to help fish move around the Tingue Dam on the Naugatuck River in Seymour.

Several marsh restoration projects in Milford and Stratford are also proposed to improve estuarine wildlife habitat. Finally, an analysis of culvert replacement opportunities in the northwest part of the state would be funded to improve stream connectivity in the upper watershed.

Next steps
The amendment is available for public comment through March 11, 2013; comments may be submitted by mail to Robin Adamcewicz, CT DEEP Eastern District Headquarters, 209 Hebron Road, Marlborough, CT 06447, or email to robin.adamcewicz@ct.gov.

Additionally, the public is invited to an informational meeting on Feb. 19 at 7 p.m. at the Town Hall in Kent. At the close of the comment period, comments will be incorporated as appropriate, a final amendment will be released, and implementation will begin.

The last phase of the restoration plan, involving any necessary follow-up evaluation or monitoring of the restoration projects, will begin as project implementation proceeds.

USFWS

Cyclists enjoying the 1-mile bike trail at Sega Meadows Park in New Milford.

USFWS

A fisherman at the new access in Harwinton.

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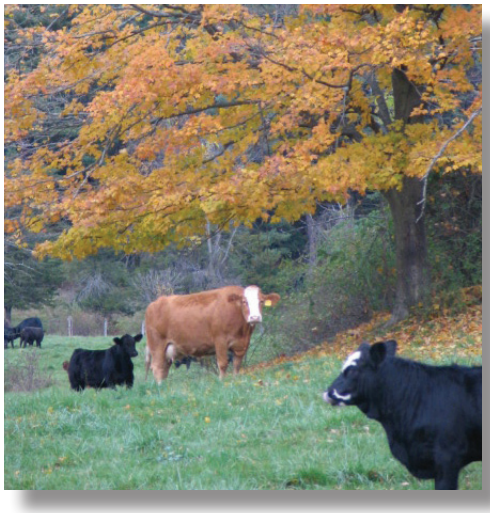

Trustees of Reservations

Shady Maple Farm, which is now protected through a conservation easement.