

RIVERKEEPER'S Almanac

A Publication of the Chester River Association
FALL 2005

Newsflash!

CRA has named Bob Parks, formerly of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, as its executive director. Check out the next Almanac for details.

A Comeback

For the Corsica River?

In late September, the Corsica River made headlines as the first watershed on the Chesapeake Bay to be the focus of an intense, inter-agency restoration effort over the next five years. The bottom line was eye-catching: \$19,422,653 to implement a comprehensive strategy of infrastructure improvements, habitat restoration and incentives for farmers and homeowners – all targeted at reducing nutrients and sediments, and improving water quality in this major tributary of the Chester. The ultimate goal is removing the Corsica from the state's 303(d) List of Impaired Waters, a designation it shares with the greater Chester.

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. made the announcement under brilliant blue skies at Ship Point on Conquest Preserve to a crowd of over 150 federal, state and local partners. His comments came during a devastating fish kill on the river, and took place directly across from Tilghman Cove, the site of a recent and blatant example of shoreline clearing in direct violation of the Critical Area Law.

Residents know there will be no shortage of challenges for this landmark endeavor. The Corsica has been plagued by a familiar suite of problems: discharges from Centreville's wastewater treatment plant into Gravel Run; nutrient runoff from farms and developed lands; aging septic systems; wetland loss and stream degradation; fish blockages; and unnecessary hardening of the natural shoreline. In warm weather, algae blooms known as "red tides" have choked the Corsica of oxygen, robbing it of vital underwater grasses and hastening the decline of its fisheries. Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) estimates that the September fish kill, attributed to algae blooms, claimed

30,000 to 50,000 fish in the Corsica, and that 15 species were affected.

An 'incredible opportunity'

For CRA President Ed Nielsen, whose parents bought a farm on the Corsica 60 years ago, the state's effort is coming in the nick of time. "As kids in the 1950s, we could pluck enough soft shells for dinner in a matter of minutes. Up until the 1970s, there were healthy underwater grasses all along the Corsica's shores. Today, by concentrating proven restoration measures in one watershed, we have a shot at restoring an entire river system, and we can export that knowledge to other rivers on the Bay. It's an incredible opportunity."

Where to begin? First, here's what you haven't read in the press. At a follow-up meeting in October, DNR outlined 10 restoration goals for the Corsica that will involve numerous state agencies:

1. Upgrade and maintain Centreville's wastewater treatment plant to Enhanced Nutrient Management, which will reduce nutrient concentrations from 8 mg/l to 4 mg/l. The plant already has a new denitrifying system online with its spray-irrigation field.
2. Establish and maintain 4,000 acres of cover crops and 2,000 acres of small grain enhancements.
3. Treat 300 acres of urban lands with stormwater management.
4. Establish 100 additional acres of buffer with the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.
5. Implement 50 acres of Horse Pasture Management best management practices.
6. Retrofit 30 septic systems with denitrification technology.
7. Establish 200 acres of reforested buffers on non-agricultural land.
8. Restore 50 acres of wetlands and two miles of stream channel.



Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.



Corsica fish kill

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9. Restore 10 acres of underwater grasses and 20 acres of oyster beds. (The river bottom has been mapped by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to determine the best sites for oyster reefs. Two historic sites have already been seeded near the mouth of the river.)
10. Monitor the effectiveness of all best management practices and water quality parameters in the tidal Corsica River.

Public-private partnership

The Corsica initiative is a pilot of the Chesapeake Bay Recovery Partnership, a new public-private arrangement between the Oyster Recovery Project and DNR. The group was created to fund and implement large-scale Bay restoration efforts. So far, about \$5.7 million has been committed to the Corsica, and officials see potential for another \$7.75 million. To close the budget gap, a long list of funding sources has been identified, including a percentage of the profits from a new product – Maryland Natural Spring Water, bottled at Brick House Springs in Ellicott City.

“Given its magnitude, one of the big things to come out of this project will be finding the pathways to access the resources to get the job done,” said John McCoy, who is coordinating the Corsica effort as Director of DNR’s Ecosystem Management Center. “To improve water quality, you have to address 60 to 70 percent of the land use in the watershed, and that’s a very different school of thought. What it says is that everybody contributes to the problem, and that everybody has to be a part of the solution.”

How did the Corsica become the focus of such an ambitious effort? In

many ways the answer goes back at least 10 years. Since the early 90s the Chesapeake Bay Program has emphasized nutrient reduction in “the tribes” – the rivers that shape our landscapes and have the ultimate influence on the health of the Bay. In Maryland, Tributary Strategy Teams were appointed in each of the state’s 10 major river systems, with the recognition that given their locations, each would require a very different approach to nutrient reduction. The Upper Eastern Shore (UES) Tributary Strategy Team includes members of the farming community, local government, and business and environmental groups such as CRA. Its first task was to verify the state’s long list of nitrogen and phosphorous sources in the watershed, and recommend the best and most cost-effective ways to reduce them.

In 2000, the state began offering towns and counties a real inducement to go a step further. They could apply to DNR for financial and technical help in developing a comprehensive Watershed Restoration Action Strategy (WRAS) that would detail conditions in their watersheds, and the concrete steps needed to

restore water quality. Under the leadership of Mike Whitehill, a former member of the Centreville Town Council who was also chair of the UES Trib Team, a WRAS was developed for the Corsica in conjunction with DNR and other agencies.

Why the Corsica?

The state cites three reasons for choosing the Corsica over other watersheds to be the pilot for a comprehensive restoration: the completion of a WRAS; the size of the watershed; and the impressive extent of local involvement. “I think the Corsica WRAS has been generally recognized, especially by the State offices, as a well founded, coherent, and feasible strategy with excellent local support,” said Frank DiGialleonardo, current chairman of the UES Trib Team and a former board member of CRA. “Even before the governor’s announcement, we made considerable progress on several of the WRAS sub-strategies.”

Local efforts have included weekly water quality monitoring by residents on the Corsica; an ambitious shoreline restoration project near Centreville wharf involving 18 homeowners; underwater grass planting and monitoring; and a tree grow-out project for a planting at Conquest Preserve. Implementing the WRAS will require even more local involvement, so organizers are establishing the Corsica River Conservancy to help residents learn more about funding opportunities made available by the project – incentives that could help encourage shoreline plantings to control erosion, as an example, or help a homeowner to upgrade a septic system.

In many ways, however, the biggest question facing the Corsica is just how serious

Centreville and Queen Anne’s County officials are about improving water quality. The Corsica can survive only so much degradation, particularly as development heats up throughout a 24,000 acre watershed that includes vulnerable feeder streams. Planned development at the Centreville wharf will be an important test, as will the town’s new Comprehensive Plan. As DiGialleonardo points out: “The watershed management strategy that we’re trying to apply here is also an ethic – a way of thinking and acting that puts good stewardship front and center. Our local and county governments should think of it as a valuable management tool, one that can help them make critical decisions as we confront growth in our watershed.”

To learn more about the Corsica River Conservancy and opportunities to get involved, email Frank DiGialleonardo: frankdig@verizon.net

– Pat Herold Nielsen



News crew interviews CRA Watershed Coordinator Brent Walls about the initiative.

CRA Advocacy Update



Chester River Association continues to fight on many fronts to protect the watershed. Here's a brief status report on a few of our top projects:

Rural Sprawl The Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, in partnership with CRA, sent out 12,000 letters in August to Queen Anne's County residents seeking their support for a moratorium on the non-contiguous development [NCD] program.

An astonishing 1,300 responses, well over 10 percent, had been returned by press time.

The development rights trading program was set up to protect farmers. But Robert J. Etgen, executive director of the Land Conservancy, says it's been abused by developers who have used a loophole to create "willy nilly" development that has led to a "feeding frenzy" of construction Etgen fears will result in runaway rural sprawl.

What's next: CRA is heading up the ground campaign to get as many as 3,200 expressions of support for the moratorium, which the two groups will seek from Queen Anne's County Commissioners in December. The county planning commission in October rejected a recommendation from CRA and the Land Conservancy that would have tightened up the NCD program.

Unicorn Branch For the past three months, CRA Watershed Coordinator Brent Walls used sensors installed at six different sites to record temperature and light intensity every five minutes in this pristine tributary.

Walls expects the data to reveal that the stream is a consistently cool water habitat, ideal for brown trout.

What's next: CRA will use the findings to bolster its argument that a proposed rubble fill near Unicorn should not be permitted. Meanwhile Queen Anne's County Commissioners are pushing for a bill in the upcoming Maryland General Assembly that would block any kind of rubble fill within two miles of Unicorn Lake.

The Mercury Campaign CRA put out a call to fishermen this fall for fish samples from around the watershed that will be tested for mercury contamination. Volunteers produced fish from more than a dozen sites. Other Waterkeeper Alliance organizations in the Chesapeake region are also participating in the project.

What's next: Walls hopes to have test results back this winter, in time to present evidence to the state legislature that alarming levels of mercury are turning up in the Chester's fish population. Once again, CRA will ask the General Assembly to force coal-fired power plants to put



CRA's Brent Walls checks monitoring stations at Unicorn Branch.

"scrubbers" on their smoke stacks, which can reduce mercury and other polluting emissions by 90 percent.

Critical Area Law CRA continues to gather information on Critical Area Law violations in Queen Anne's County, which has a history of lapses. This spring on the Corsica, the county issued a permit to a developer for extensive tree removal along the shore *after* the trees were cut down. Outraged neighbors complained to CRA.

"We want stronger county enforcement," says Walls.

What's next: CRA for the first time is working with Waterkeepers across Maryland to track violations in a collaborative effort to bring a statewide focus to the problem.

Upcoming SPECIAL EVENTS

Check out our website or call the CRA office for more information on future events and opportunities.

Saturday, December 3

Chester Tester Training

CRA is looking for new volunteers to monitor the Chester River twice monthly for nutrients and toxic chemicals. Additional volunteers are needed because CRA is expanding its reach from the main stem of river into tributaries. Training will take place 8:30 a.m. to noon at Sudlersville Middle School. Call Watershed Coordinator Brent Walls for details, 410-810-7556.

Friday, December 9

Volunteer "River Investigator" Training

Walls will train volunteers to monitor the Chester River for contaminants at construction sites, dumping grounds, marinas and swimming areas, among other sites. "We want them to be the eyes and ears of the watershed," Walls says about the new program. Training will begin at 6 p.m. at CRA headquarters.



Ryan Bickley photo

Great Pumpkin Party 2005

Almanac photographer and CRA board member Tyler Campbell let Ryan Bickley, 14, borrow his camera at Pumpkin Party last month. Ryan, son of CRA members Bill and Lynn Bickley, shot this picture of Gibson Anthony and his son, Ben.



Help Us Save the Chester

What does it take to run the Chester River Association? Probably more than you think.

At the moment, it costs roughly \$1,000 a day to finance CRA, which celebrates its 20th anniversary next year. Here are some sample expenses:

- Monthly office rent, \$925
- Annual slip rental for RIVERKEEPER's boat, \$1,275
- A tank of gas for the boat, \$117
- Watershed Snapshot sampling kit, \$50
- Room rental for "Town Hall" meetings, \$50
- Annual boat insurance premium, \$1,105
- Monthly photocopier lease, \$180
- The cost of this Almanac mailing: \$597



Many of you have just received our annual appeal letter, outlining CRA's accomplishments over this past year and our plans going forward. Please help us to continue to do our important work: protecting the Chester River watershed.

As CRA president Ed Nielsen notes, "We can't do this without the community's continued financial support. Most of our funding comes from individuals. Please give generously. We're counting on you."



Contact us:

Chester River Association Office:
410-810-7556

Bob Parks, Executive Director
bparks@chesterriverassociation.org

Brent Walls, Watershed Coordinator
bwalls@chesterriverassociation.org

Bobbi Marshall, Office Manager
bmarshall@chesterriverassociation.org

For more information visit our website:
www.chesterriverassociation.org

Photography by Tyler Campbell



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100 North Cross Street, Suite One
Chestertown, Maryland 21620