

## **Fall 2004 HooRWA Newsletter**

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A Call for Literature: Announcing the 2005 River Writing contest.

### **A Fall Fish Story.**

As this newsletter is written, fall foliage is reaching its peak of color. Soon the leaves will drop by the millions, and, after raking our share, we will forget about them for the winter. But in our watershed's streams, that gift of leaves goes on giving.

Picture a good trout stream, cold and clear, with aquatic insects for the fish to eat. It takes a lot of bugs to grow a pound of trout. But what do those insects eat? That thin, foot-slipping coat of algae on the stones can't feed them all. Much of the stream's food supply comes from the tons of leaves that drop in every autumn, to be broken down and recycled by stream organisms. Not our idea of a Thanksgiving dinner, perhaps, but an important annual feast for the watershed. (And, like leftover turkey, it sits there in cold storage for a long, long time, going through many transformations.)

So, why protect forests? Because trout grow on trees. Really.

### **Volunteers Keep Water Moving**

Okay, we admit that most of the water in the Hoosic system moves along all by itself. But in order to test water quality, samples need to be collected and transported from scattered locations and brought to labs for analysis. On a given day, these may come from the South Branch in Cheshire, MA, or from Pownal, Vermont, or the Walloomsac, or Hoosick Falls and Petersburg in New York. Timing is critical, too: some samples need to be tested within hours of collection. For this widespread and coordinated effort, we thank our monitoring volunteers.

People are sometimes surprised to find out that state agencies lack the resources to monitor our streams and rivers very frequently. Some are only sampled every few years, if at all. Since pollution problems can come and go in a matter of days, weeks, or months, volunteer monitoring programs can detect incidents or trouble spots that would otherwise be missed. This is why our volunteers clamber down riverbanks or hang over bridges with odd sampling contraptions, from spring through early fall. We are very grateful for their work in the 2004 season!

### **THANK YOU TO:**

#### **The Headwaters Chapter of Trout Unlimited (New York):**

Bill Shorter, Vic Widman, Joel Shorter, Gary Coyne, Bob Hill, and Shawn Jones. AND TO:

Irv Tanzman (Vermont)

Robin Avery (Massachusetts)

May all your socks stay dry!

## **Those Persistent PCBs—Cause for Alarm?**

It's hard to know what to say when asked if PCBs are "a problem" in the Hoosic. We've compiled information from a recent study done by Williams student Elaine Denny, under the supervision of Professor David Richardson, which may help answer questions.

*What is a worrisome level of PCBs?*

1 part per million is the EPA's "starting point action level" for residential areas.

A lower concentration— about one fifth of a part per million— is used by the VT Dept. of Environmental Conservation as a "screening level"— a level that warrants caution and continued monitoring.

*What are current levels of PCBs in the Hoosic?* Denny examined surface and subsurface soil. At many sites, PCB concentration was below the VT screening level, but in some sites the level fell between the VT and EPA values. Two areas where PCB levels were high were just downstream of the old Sprague Electric Co. in North Adams and just downstream of the old tannery dam in Pownal. (One sample near the old Sprague site exceeded 1ppm.) Very fine sediments also tend to have somewhat higher concentrations of PCBs.

*Do these levels affect human health?* There is no one answer to this, as effects vary with time, type of exposure, age, type of PCB, and other factors. One method of calculating cancer risk in a 4-year old indicates that, if soil were contaminated with 0.23 ppm of PCBs (a level found in some sites on the Hoosic) and the child ate 20 milligrams of dirt per day for 60 days, the chance of developing cancer would be less than one in ten million. Risks of non-cancer effects are less well known.

*Can I eat Hoosic fish?* There is a total ban on eating Hoosic fish in MA and VT, and a ban on eating trout over 14 inches more than once a month in NY.

*Is the situation improving?* There is evidence that PCB contamination is less since the major sources were cleaned up, but improvement may be occurring more slowly than originally hoped. PCBs take a long time to break down. Still, the Hoosic mainstem is far less contaminated than the Housatonic or Hudson, and most of its small tributaries are likely to be cleaner still.

## **From the President**

"Where is HooRWA going and how will we get there?" Those are the questions the HooRWA board of directors and staff addressed in our recent strategic planning sessions. Everybody got to offer their ideas (little and big) in those brainstorming gatherings, and the result was an initial list of projects and goals and activities nearly seventy items long. (It's amazing how creative people can be when EVERY idea is welcomed!) In later meetings, we whittled the list down to about fifteen items. This list will guide us in developing project ideas, programs, work plans, and budgets in the next few years.

Many of the items are familiar. (That means we're "on mission!") We'll continue a monitoring program, offering educational and recreational programs for families, sponsoring clean-ups, and working on the Adams flood chute initiative, for example. But we also agreed to place more emphasis on expanding our efforts into Vermont and New York, and on providing education to older students. On these issues we've already made progress: the Rensselaer County Trout Unlimited chapter is helping us monitor the Little Hoosic River, and we've arranged to hold our spring 2005 State of the River conference at Southern Vermont College in Bennington.

Of course, one of the things we always think about is money. Board members and especially Eileen, our executive director, have been pursuing grant funding of many kinds. You can help too! If you haven't already done so, please renew your 2004 membership. Think about giving a gift membership, or persuading your employer to contribute. And finally, partner with us on a project. We welcome your ideas too, so please, give us a call!

## **Chutes!**

Progress on the Adams Floodchute Restoration Project is stalled. The Army Corps of Engineers, in charge of designing and implementing the project, reports that the original design flow must be maintained, and that no structural changes to the chutes will be considered at this time. It is unlikely that the project, as currently envisioned by the Corps, will meet the aesthetic and recreational aspects of the Adams downtown Development Plan. Alternate plans for restoring habitat might be considered, but generating more plans and implementing them requires substantial funding. The Corps is suffering from low funding for engineering and will not be working on this project for at least several months, and the Federal 1135 program for Ecosystem Restoration is so underfunded and backlogged that it is hardly a realistic option. If an alternative to the Corps' current design is to be generated, it might require Congressional authorization outside of the current program, and funding from new sources.

Faced with this situation, the Watershed Team is working out its next moves. Several constructive suggestions were provided by Elena Traister, a Yale graduate student who researched this issue while working as a summer intern for the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. Her report recommends specific items, such as tree planting for shade outside the chutes (and not within the Corps project), as well as a recommendation to assemble a broad-based coalition of interested parties to define goals for the restoration and generate political and financial support for them. She also provided case studies of successful restorations in other parts of the country which might be used as templates. Acting on these suggestions may pave the way for future progress.

## **Watershed Land in Pownal to Change Hands**

This November, residents of Pownal, VT will vote to decide the fate of almost 4,000 acres in the Broad Brook drainage. The land currently belongs to the City of North Adams. Over the years, North Adams has made parts of the property available for commercial and recreational uses, and has also paid \$36,000 per year in taxes to Pownal.

Since North Adams no longer draws water from Broad Brook, it consulted with a national nonprofit, the Trust for Public Land (TPL), to decide what to do with the property. TPL has worked out a proposed deal for the U.S. Forest Service to purchase most of the land, including some in Stamford, for inclusion in the Green Mountain National Forest. Pownal, concerned about tax implications, voted several years ago to have a referendum on any proposed USFS purchase. The selectmen decided in September to put the question on the November ballot.

The proposed deal would offset the loss in tax income to Pownal by taking 250 acres of the parcel and making them into home lots. The Forest Service would agree to multiple uses of the property, and respect existing arrangements for trails that cross the property, such as the Appalachian National Scenic Trail/Long Trail and several other off-road vehicle and foot trails such as the Broad Brook Trail, the Dome Trail, and the connector from Pine Cobble to the Long Trail. The Forest Service may also continue paying taxes on the land, though it is not bound to do so.

Should the Forest Service purchase be voted against, other potential owners would not be obligated to allow multiple uses. Possible purchasers for such a parcel could include logging companies, or "kingdom" private buyers who intend to exclude recreational use by posting the land.

Of most importance to HooRWA is the protection of water quality through sound land management, and enjoyment of the watershed by citizens. By these criteria, the Forest Service purchase is the most desirable option, and the HooRWA Board voted unanimously in October to endorse the purchase of the Broad Brook property by the USFS.

As Board Member Lauren Stevens noted, "seldom does an opportunity come along to provide multiple benefits for so many on such a large tract of land."

## **Have an Old Canoe?**

**Or kayak, or whitewater raft, or fishing pole?**

These days, there are many worthy causes clamoring for your dollars. But HooRWA doesn't insist on negotiable currency, if you have used river recreation equipment in good condition. Donations of small water craft (non-motorized), paddles, life jackets, or fishing gear would be gladly accepted. When enough has been received—that is, when we can no longer climb over it to get to our file cabinets— we'll have a fundraising tag sale. You can even buy back your old stuff if you've changed your mind, (and meanwhile it's been out of your way, hasn't it?).

For more information, please call the HooRWA office at 413-458-2742.

### **A Call for Literature**

One of the most rewarding parts of our annual River Writing contest is finding out that the Hoosic and its branches mean many things to many people. After hearing the winning entries read last Spring, I've had more ways of looking at the river, thanks to the young writers who shared their reflections.

This year, we want to hear from more people than ever, and we are opening the contest to adult contributors as well as students in grades 7-12. We particularly encourage elder members of the community to share memories of how the river used to be— both the good and the bad— to help us get perspective on the river as we now see it.

If you haven't any river experiences to reflect on, let's go out and get some! **Hikes and workshops just for river writers** will be offered this fall and winter, leaving plenty of time to write by the April 1 deadline.

The River Writing project is co-sponsored by **Inkberry**, the literary nonprofit in North Adams, and by the **Advocate Weekly** newspaper. Details will be in our Winter issue. But don't wait! Now is a good time to walk, observe, reflect, reminisce— and then write. We'd love to hear from you.