

Talking Points for Woonasquatucket River Event

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Good morning. My name is Pooh Vongkhamdy, State Conservationist for NRCS in Rhode Island. I am honored to be here today to participate in this historic event. NRCS has been honored to support the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council and the many partnerships they have galvanized in order to restore this important American Heritage River System.

The 18 mile Woonasquatucket River is federally designated as an “American Heritage River,” like many urban rivers today. It has been dammed, straightened, covered over, floodplain and wetlands destroyed, and its natural banks replaced by concrete flood walls.

Local, State and Federal partners have realized that significant migratory fisheries habitat restoration can occur as a part of urban revitalization efforts. The projects that have been the focus of urban revitalization efforts in Olneyville have provided NRCS the opportunity to implement riparian restoration/and fish passage restoration in concert with urban redevelopment to benefit the poorest and most disadvantaged neighborhoods in our region.

Thanks to the Watershed Council who nominated USDA NRCS as the “River Champion” Agency in 2003. NRCS has been able to make sound ecologically significant investments in river restoration throughout the Blackstone Woonasquatucket River Heritage River Basins.

The results have been significant:

- Since 2003, NRCS funded over \$4.5 million dollars in fish passage and river conservation efforts through our Farm Bill programs with private and public landowners.
- Over 1,000 acres of habitat are now under restoration through our work within these American Heritage Rivers (Blackstone, Ten Mile, Woonasquatucket).
- NRCS has completed fishways at Rising Sun Mills and Atlantic Mills.
- And this year, NRCS will work with our partners to begin construction of fish passage restoration at: Paragon Mills Dam, Dyerville Dam, Omega Pond Dam-Ten Mile River, Main Street Dam-Blackstone River, and Old Slater Mill Dam-Blackstone River.

With the recent completion of the Atlantic Mills Fish ladder, NRCS has been able to contribute over **5,000 acres** of aquatic habitat restoration in the State through projects enrolled in Farm Bill Conservation Programs. Over the past five years, **NRCS has obligated over \$8 million dollars in restoration funding** which will help restore our State's fisheries as well as provide jobs to our struggling communities. While much work remains to be completed in restoring our State's coastal habitats, these projects will result in immediate positive effects.

Lastly, I would also like to mention that as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, NRCS has \$145 million for floodplain easements and floodplain restoration funds. NRCS will make these funds available statewide on private, State, municipal, and tribal lands. I encourage you to apply by contacting NRCS. The application deadline is March 27, 2009.

If you would like to learn more on various other NRCS conservation programs, please contact our local office in Rhode Island. Thank you and on behalf of NRCS staff in Rhode Island, we look forward to working with you in the future.