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New plans in the works for cleaner streams in Lancaster and Centre counties

Conejohela Flats, Little Fishing Creek areas
up next for CBF watershed management plans

(HARRISBURG) – The Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF), local residents, and other conservation organizations will be working together to create watershed management plans that will improve water quality in Lancaster and Centre counties.

After creating two watershed management plans, each primarily in Lancaster and Centre counties, CBF is turning its attention to local streams in the Conejohela Flats and Little Fishing Creek areas, which do not meet water quality standards.

The plans are designed to restore and protect local streams for the health, well-being, and quality of life of watershed residents. Water quality experts and local residents work together to develop the plan to implement strategies like planting riparian buffers, stream restoration, streambank fencing, cover crops, no-till agriculture and more.

The final plans are consistent with Countywide Action Plans that contribute to local commitments toward achieving goals of Pennsylvania's final Phase 3 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Implementation Plan.

The Conejohela Flats plan will focus on 17.6 square miles in Lancaster County, containing 10 streams and totaling 25.5 miles in length, 89 percent of which are impaired due to agricultural or stormwater runoff. All 10 tributaries feed directly into the Susquehanna River. With a population of about 20,000 people, the watershed includes the Boroughs of Columbia and Mountville, and Manor and West Hempfield townships.

Conejohela is a Native American word that means "kettle on a long, upright pole." It refers to a Native American settlement from the early 1700s and a group of islands and mud flats in the Susquehanna River.

Columbia is an Environmental Justice community and the urban core of the watershed. The town's rich history includes falling just one vote shy of being chosen as the nation's capital and halting the Confederate Army's northern advance ahead of the Battle of Gettysburg.

"The neat thing about this plan, is that its focus is a collection of small, adjacent streams, rather than a single, large one and its tributaries," said Brian Gish, CBF Pennsylvania Senior Watershed Planner. "It's a diverse mix of urban, suburban, rural, and natural spaces, all connected by the Susquehanna. It's novel and I'm excited about it."

"The locally driven work in these tributaries is important for clean and clear water in Lancaster," said Allyson Gibson, Director of Strategic Partnerships and Programs for Lancaster Clean Water Partners. "Plans for water quality improvement projects that our riverland communities will do give us specifics that add momentum to a countywide initiative. Whether the creek water runs into a stream or into the mighty Susquehanna, it all matters. We're collaboratively improving all of it, together."

The Little Fishing Creek Watershed, in Centre County and a small part of Clinton County, comprises 25 tributaries. Over 8 of its 58 miles of streams are impaired due to sedimentation. It is 42 square miles with roughly 3,450 residents.

"Little Fishing Creek stood out for a watershed management plan," CBF Pennsylvania Senior Watershed Planner Caitlin Glagola said. "Trout Unlimited and others have been doing work on Fishing Creek, so it is a way connect with some efforts happening downstream."

"Key goals of ours include improving local water quality and promoting watershed stewardship, which is why we are looking forward to partnering with CBF on the Little Fishing Creek watershed plan," said Ivie Foster of the Centre County Conservation District.

Planning processes for the Conejohela Flats and Little Fishing Creek projects are in the preliminary, information-gathering stages. "When these plans are being developed, we want to let local people know what is going on and make those connections early on," Glagola said.

"Partnerships are the biggest assets," Glagola said. "If you have a plan in place, it is only effective if we and partners make sure that what we've collectively worked toward and put into it writing gets set into action."

Previous plans coordinated by Gish and Glagola in Lancaster and Centre counties are being put into action. They are being referenced to leverage funding and put into practice by conservation districts and others to inform where clean water efforts should be made in their respective areas.

Gish coordinated management plans for the Pequea Creek (Lancaster and Chester counties) and Upper Conestoga River (Lancaster, Berks and Chester counties) watersheds.

Glagola has coordinated management plans for the Halfmoon Creek (Centre and Huntingdon counties) and Marsh Creek (Centre County) watersheds.

The Pequea and Halfmoon plans were approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and are now eligible for federal funding.

The Upper Conestoga River and Marsh Creek plans have been submitted to the state DEP for review.

When CBF developed the previous watershed management plans, partners included county conservation districts, local watershed and conservation organizations, academic institutions, state and local government agencies, local businesses, planning agencies, landowners, farmers, and residents.

“In Marsh Creek, we really upped the ante on communications and community engagement,” Glagola said. “These are voluntary, not regulatory plans. It’s about providing resources and hearing from landowners about what they want and building that into the plan.”

“We try to build on previous plans, add new levels of analysis, and make each plan better than the previous one,” Gish said. “In Conejohela, I’m taking a deeper dive into land use and development, making the growth dynamics of western Lancaster County a key part of a future-focused approach.”

Photo by Brian Gish/CBF Staff

The Conejohela Flats watershed management plan will focus on 17.6 square miles in Lancaster County, containing 10 streams, the great majority of which are impaired due to agricultural or stormwater runoff.

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EDITORS NOTE: *CBF Pennsylvania Senior Watershed Planners Brian Gish and Caitlin Glagola are available for Media interviews by contacting B.J. Small, CBF PA Communications and Media Relations Manager by email at bsmall@cbf.org or (717) 253-0599.*