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Partnership conserves 531 acres on Lamprey River

EPPING — The Lamprey River Advisory Committee, U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service, and Southeast Land Trust announced the protection of more than 531 acres of wildlife habitat, floodplain and wetlands with more than one mile of shoreline on the federally designated Wild and Scenic Lamprey River, and in Epping.

The project, ranked first in New Hampshire by the Federal Wetlands Reserve Program, achieves the shared goals of a broad partnership among local, regional, and federal entities including the Lamprey River Advisory Committee (LRAC), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Southeast Land Trust of NH.

"Protection of this property is a major victory" states Sharon Meeker, chair of the LRAC land protection committee. LRAC serves as the local management advisory committee under the state Rivers Management and Protection Program and the federal Wild & Scenic Rivers program. "The Lamprey River Advisory Committee identified this parcel as one of our highest conservation priorities and we were pleased to partner with the land trust and NRCS to make it happen".

"Because of the many public benefits, this land is a conservation priority both regionally and statewide" notes David Viale of the Southeast Land Trust, a regional conservation organization based out of Exeter. For the past four years, the Land Trust and LRAC have formally partnered together to conserve important lands along the Lamprey River. "Conserving this land will help protect the water quality of the Lamprey River, preserve and restore critical wildlife habitat, and ensure that large blocks of open space will remain undeveloped and available for passive recreation and enjoyment by the public."

According to Viale the property represents the highest co-occurrence of natural resource values within the area, with significant wetland resources, including more than 350 acres of diverse wetlands that include streams, extensive vernal pools, Red Maple floodplain forest, Black gum and pitch pine-heath swamp, and more than 1 mile of frontage on the Lamprey River. In addition, the acquisition includes over 150 acres of upland hemlock-hardwood-pine forest. These attributes made it a top priority in the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department's State Wildlife Action Plan and the Land Conservation Plan for New Hampshire's Coastal Watershed, developed in 2006 to help prioritize conservation work in the region.

"The importance of this property for New Hampshire wildlife, water quality for the Lamprey River and Great Bay, and recreational opportunities cannot be overstated", said Rick Ellsmore, State Conservationist. "We are grateful to the SELTNH and the LRAC for their hard work making the protection and restoration of this property possible".

Under the Wetlands Reserve Program, the property was ranked as the top project in 2010 due to its significant natural resources, proximity to other conservation lands, wetlands

restoration needs, and the matching funds provided by the Lamprey River Advisory Committee.

The land, previously owned by NH Public Golf Courses Inc., was once slated as a potential site for a golf course and related residential and commercial development. Due to its location on the Lamprey River and proximity to thousands of acres of conservation land in Epping, Exeter, and Newfields the protection of this land was also a top priority for the Lamprey River Advisory Committee.

The land was conserved through two transactions. First, the landowner sold a conservation easement to the federal Wetlands Reserve Program. The WRP is administered by the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service and is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property.

The WRP conservation easement limits future residential, commercial, and industrial development of the property and restricts uses that would degrade the natural resource values. In addition, degraded wetlands will be restored to optimize wetland functions and value.

After the easement was conveyed to the WRP, the underlying fee ownership was transferred to the Southeast Land Trust of New Hampshire who intends to manage the property for wildlife habitat and passive recreation. "This property will continue to be a focus of the Land Trust for several years, as we work to restore the property's wetlands, enhance critical wildlife habitat, provide passive recreation opportunities for the public," explains Viale.

Funding for the project included \$1.5 million from the Wetlands Reserve Program, with \$220,000 of matching funds from the Lamprey River Advisory Committee. LRAC's matching funds were used to support the purchase of the easement and transaction costs, including survey and environmental assessments. The LRAC also provided an additional \$75,000 to support the Southeast Land Trust's long term management and stewardship of the property, including the development of a formal management plan.

For more information on the property, visit www.seltnh.org.
