

Habitat Restoration Team Meeting Notes June 21, 2012

Habitat Working Group / Subcommittees Updates

Salt Marshes: Salt Marsh Assessment Working Group, Marci Cole-Ekberg, Save The Bay

A group led by Save The Bay (Marci Cole-Ekberg and Wenley Ferguson) is working to assess what are assumed to be the effects of sea level rise on Rhode Island salt marshes. In particular they have been seeing subsidence, vegetation community changes and accelerated edge erosion in recent years. The overall assessment will be a multi-tiered effort using eelgrass aerial photos for Tier 1, field visits and a rapid assessment protocol for Tier 2 and information gathered from NBNERR sentinel sites for Tier 3. The Tier 2 rapid assessment protocol currently being developed will build upon existing methods to achieve a baseline assessment of Rhode Island's salt marshes while addressing the question of how increases in sea level rise rates may be affecting them. The protocol will be finalized over the next two weeks with trainings being held on the protocol in late summer.

Eelgrass: Eelgrass Mapping Task Force, Marci Cole-Ekberg, Save The Bay

The Task Force is hoping for a suitable weather / tide / time of day window so that the next round of eelgrass aerial photos, originally scheduled to be taken in 2011, can be taken this summer. **UPDATE: Eelgrass overflights were completed for the entire state during the June 27-30th window. Ground-truthing will happen in mid-August after the images have been processed and photo interpretation is complete.**

Save The Bay's large-scale eelgrass transplant efforts were discontinued in 2010 (after transplants at Prudence Island, Hog Island and Coggeshall) due to a lack of suitable sites. There are plans for future transplant efforts given recent water quality improvements within Narragansett Bay.

It was noted that NOAA recently funded a study (conducted by Fred Short through TNC) that assessed genetic variability within eelgrass populations in Southern New England. The next phase of the study will look at subaqueous soils and water quality impacts. The overall aim of the study is to relate the information gathered to population success to inform site selection for future restoration efforts.

Shellfish: Shellfish Technical Working Group, Bryan DeAngelis, NOAA Restoration Center

Members of the Shellfish Technical Working Group have formed a set of subcommittees including a monitoring committee, outreach committee and permitting committee. The monitoring committee, led by Matt Griffin and Roger Williams University, has developed a standardized oyster restoration monitoring protocol. The protocol will be published on the CRMC website. A shellfish disease and restoration database created by Marta Gomez-Chiarri and others at URI is scheduled to go live by this fall. The database contains a number of different data layers including information on monitoring, disease, natural stock, restoration projects and aquaculture as well as tracking information that allows users to follow animals from hatchery to nursery to water. Additional layers of data will be added and possibly include ROMS modeling and subaqueous soil information.

Rivers: River Restoration Working Group, Tom Ardito, NBEP

The River Restoration Working Group has continued to work on its white paper, incorporating revisions resulting from meetings with RIDEM, and developing watershed maps to be included in the final version.

The Renewable Energy Siting Partnership held the second of two hydropower workshops on June 19th. Of particular interest to the restoration community is the map viewer that has been created as part of the project by URI EDC. The viewer contains dam information including ownership details and water quality data. RIDEM has also created a hydropower siting guidance document as part of this effort. The Partnership's hydropower report is expected to be published in the next few weeks.

The USDA-NRCS stream continuity project will be continued in the short-term as mapping is completed for the Pawcatuck watershed. Stream continuity mapping is being conducted in the East Bay on smaller streams on a limited basis by conservation districts.

Native Plants: Rhody Native Initiative, Hope Leeson, RINHS

The Rhody Native Initiative, funded by a 2009 ARRA grant, has been working with growers to propagate plants from genetically diverse local seed stock with the goal of improving ecological resiliency and diversity. The group works with volunteers and follows Bureau of Land Management and New England Wildflower Society protocols to collect seed, focusing on plants that are good candidates for landscape and restoration projects, and that are at the northern end of their range. The group has an agreement with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Refuge Complex for collection and propagation of plants for restoration, and is looking to establish founder plots. Seven retailers now offer Rhody Native plants.

Freshwater Wetlands: RIDEM Freshwater Wetland Restoration Strategy Working Group, Carol Murphy, RIDEM

RIDEM is making revisions to its draft freshwater wetlands restoration strategy, which will be circulated to the working group when it is finalized. The draft is a general guidance document that recommends a tiered approach to restoration and includes recommendations for future efforts. Survey results have been compiled to create an inventory of completed freshwater wetland restoration projects, and specific restoration sites have been evaluated using the floristic quality assessment (FQA) method.

Individual Project Updates:

Pawtuxet Falls Partial Dam Removal (Tom Ardito) – The partial dam removal was completed and planting and site restoration are expected to be completed this year. NBEP hopes to do post-restoration assessment work. It is already known that post-restoration water surface elevations are lower than what was predicted in the design modeling for the project.

Pawcatuck River (Jim Turek, NOAA Restoration Center) – The dam removal at Lower Shannock Falls is complete; modifications to the rock weirs still need to be made. Construction of the fishway and eelway are complete at Horseshoe Falls dam, with a few minor modifications to be made. Remaining work on both projects is scheduled to be done this summer. Fish passage restoration at Kenyon Mills will be dam removal and construction of a rock ramp. The project is currently out to bid but facing potential delays related to the FEMA Conditional Letters of Map Revision and Letters of Map Revision process.

Ten Mile River – The Hunts Mill fish ladder is complete and construction of the fish ladder at Turner Reservoir dam is in progress. Mobilization has begun at Omega Pond dam, however the project is facing delays related to the submerged gas line at the project site (the surveyed location of the site was inaccurate).

Ninigret Oyster Reef Construction (Steven Brown, The Nature Conservancy) – The Nature Conservancy has constructed artificial oyster reefs in Ninigret Pond as part of a substrate enhancement pilot project. Project components include site selection, spat monitoring and shell recycling programs.

Additional Announcements

- The NBEP and RI Natural History Survey have issued an RFP for a Climate Ready Estuaries project on the lower Pawtuxet River. The goal of the project is identify opportunities to increase ecological resilience and address impacts of climate change on the Lower Pawtuxet River. Contractor selection will occur July 9th.
- Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program funding (USDA-NRCS) has been shifted to the Working Lands for Wildlife program and is specifically programmed for New England cottontail habitat projects (there is an effort to add eastern brook trout to the program). Projects targeting any other species are being funded through EQIP.
- The CRMC will hold an Aquatic Invasive Species Task Force conference on August 17, 2012. The purpose of the conference will be to establish Early Detection-Rapid Response (EDRR) teams and to discuss EDRR protocols.
- NBEP and CRMC plan update the existing state Habitat Restoration Strategy. This effort will build upon recent progress of the HRT subcommittees and related habitat work groups. Development of a work plan for this effort will likely begin in the fall.