

HOLLY CREEK CONSERVATION MEETING

CHATSWORTH, GA
DEC 6, 2017

MEETING NOTES COMPILED BY
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MEETING NOTES

It has been several years since this group has met to discuss conservation goals in the Holly Creek watershed, a sub-watershed of the Conasauga river. The purpose of this meeting was to bring together conservationists, educators, and other local interests in the watershed to discuss threats to biodiversity and water quality and to begin to develop shared goals around those threats. Projects that are guaranteed (i.e. funding is already secured) or very likely to happen in the near future are highlighted.

Meeting attendees included:

Attendee	Affiliation	Attendee	Affiliation
Alex Lamle	TNC	Linda Gheesling	Save GA's Hemlocks
Katie Owens	TNC	Frank Gheesling	Save GA's Hemlocks
Sara Gottlieb	TNC	Haley Wise	TNACI
Anita Goetz	USFWS	Brenda Jackson	UGA Extension
Jason Wisniewski	DNR (non game)	John Loughridge	UGA Extension
Adam Hammond	DNR	Matthew Sanford	Murray County
Cindy Askew	NRCS	John Lugthart	Dalton State
Nicholas Mooneyham	NRCS	Gretchen Lugthart	NGACW
Ruth Stokes	USFS		

MEETING SUMMARIES

1. Alex Lamle, Limestone Valley RC&D Watershed Management Plan

- Land Use in Holly Creek is largely in natural cover and/or protected
- Four stream segments are 303(d)/305(b) listed for water quality (2 for fecal coliform, 2 for lack of biotic integrity)
 - Causes include: Failing septic tanks, livestock access (lack of exclusion), poor habitat quality due to excessive sedimentation
- A few stream crossings were identified as potential barriers to fish passage
 - TNC assessed some of these barriers this summer
 - 1 had already been addressed (Gold Mine Branch)
 - Holly Creek-Cool Springs Rd culvert ranked as "Significant Barrier"
 - Rock Creek culvert ranked as a "minor barrier"

- Restoration Goals (Watershed Improvement Goals)
 - Incentivizing land owners to address pollution sources through cost-share
 - Anti-Degradation – taking a watershed approach with cost-share programs and other incentives
 - Education
- We’re unsure of the timeline for implementation of this plan. Unfortunately, Limestone Valley could not make it to this meeting.

2. Katie Owens and Anita Goetz: Overview of past TNC-USFWS projects in the watershed:

- Dill Creek Road crossing culverts were replaced with a free-span bridge
 - The bridge is undersized and abutments are being undercut
 - Discussions are underway with Murray County to ensure long-term stability
 - Fish passage issues have been addressed
 - Large alluvial fan at confluence just downstream with Holly Creek has the potential to create a seasonal fish passage barrier at low flows
- Tanksley Restoration Site – private landowner with hay fields; vertical eroding stream banks
 - TNC and USFWS worked to establish bankfull bench and re-establish native vegetation
 - GA DNR has been monitoring mussels for several years at this site; a high level of fluctuation has been observed – could be related to sampling methods or to temporary sedimentation issues
- Osborne Tract vegetation planting (FWS-TNC)
- Holly Creek watershed assessment in 2005 (FWS)
 - GPS points and photographs of problem areas – all available in a GIS
 - Top issue was lack of riparian buffer
 - Effort took about 3 days total
 - We will plan to do another watershed assessment in the spring. Parties interested in participating include:
 - John Lugthart, Anita Goetz, Gretchen Lugthart, Hayley Wise, Jason Wisniewski, Brenda Jackson, Adam Hammond, Ruth Stokes, Katie Owens, and Alex Lamle
 - Alex will schedule this assessment with everyone
- More recently, TNC partnered with Save Georgia’s Hemlocks in November and treated over 700 Hemlocks on TNC and Forest Service property around Holly Creek.
 - TNC and Save GA’s Hemlocks plan to partner on a planting project around Holly Creek in the coming year.

3. Cindy Askew: Update on Working Lands for Wildlife/ CRP Discussion

- Ranking criteria targeted animal waste storage and management in 2016 (\$384,000) funded three operations in the watershed
 - Prioritized operations that are the most significant contributors to pollution in the watershed (chicken broiler and breeder operations) – appropriate storage and application (timing) of litter
 - A comprehensive nutrient management plan has to be in place prior to receiving funds (soil tests, etc. to determine application rates)
 - Ag BMPs have been implemented on an ongoing basis for years – most work in Holly Creek proper has focused on grazing operations (~20); less impact of chicken operations than in the larger watershed
 - Livestock exclusion has highest priority for funding (because of large impact)
 - National and State criteria include non-supporting stream segments
 - Key factor is having a willing land owner, so outreach and education to land owners is very important
- Working Lands for Wildlife funding is not dedicated so NRCS at the state level decides how much money to pull from another funding pot into WLW for specific priority watersheds
- CRP – national cap on total acres nationwide and current levels are near the limit
 - Livestock exclusion (fencing) to allow regeneration in riparian buffers, but is not necessarily native vegetation
 - Hardwood plantings difficult to maintain in bottomlands
 - Fence maintenance is the primary task for the land owner to stay in compliance
 - Most contracts are renewed after 10-year period expires
 - Typical buffer widths ~25-30 ft
- EQIP – livestock exclusion
- Conservation Use Tax Abatement program helps keep land in agricultural use rather than being turned over to development
 - Conversion to residential slowed considerably in 2008 and has been slow to pick up again.
- There are some absentee-owners (inherited farm land) who don't know what to do with their land. Cindy and Brenda try to link them with potential leasees.

4. Brenda Jackson: UGA Ag Extension 4H Water Quality Monitoring Program

- Incentivizes 4H students to do water testing by providing a discount on summer camp
- 4H₂O Summer Camp – water quality testing and trash pickup
 - Wants to expand program to a longer stretch of the River

5. Jason Wisniewski: DNR Mussel Occupancy Update

- DNR has been conducting comprehensive survey of Upper Coosa over the past several years
- Still finding more biodiversity than expected, though not in high numbers
- Identified ~12 sites for potential mussel reintroduction; habitat is good, evidence of reproduction, but population numbers are so low, it's hard for them to re-establish
- Upper Coosa Biologist position within GA DNR Non-Game section will be filled in spring 2018, and that person will hopefully sit within the basin.
- Mark-Recapture study initiated ~4 years ago at Tanksley property but success rate too low to estimate survival and recruitment.
- Recruitment overall during the past 3-4 years has been better than the previous 10-20 possibly due to decent rainfall
- Transco funds for mussel reintroduction can possibly be applied in Holly Creek and Rock Creek

6. Katie Owens: TRANSCO funds in the Conasauga

- TNC was given funding as offset for aquatic species impact
- Plans to apply some of it to mussel restoration, split between high priority watersheds within the greater Etowah and Conasauga basins.
- Collaborating with GA DNR, FWS, other partners to help prioritize and implement within in the next 2-3 years.

7. Ruth Stokes: Chattahoochee National Forest Foothills Collaborative

- Environmental analysis on a large scale, rather than small project areas
- Holly Creek fits within 1st landscape selected within Foothills
- The goal of this project is to prescribe land management and watershed improvement activities at landscape scale
- Spent last year in collaborative planning effort with partners and stakeholders
- Timber management, fire management, watershed improvement, road closures, 4-wheeler trail closures
 - Paving Old CCC Camp Road (1.8 mi) to Emery Creek wind and replacing big bridge – would have to be in partnership with Murray County, but the previous Commissioner backed out (Eastern Federal Lands Access fund/requires local government participation)
 - Murray County would need to provide 20% match for underpavement surface/culverts
 - TNC is supportive of this project.
- Proposed actions are under a comment period right now (comments due Dec 22)
- GA DNR Fisheries requested more visitor amenities for public fishing access, and habitat management

- We should follow the final product of this collaborative to understand what it means for Holly Creek.

DISCUSSION OF THREATS AND CONSERVATION GOALS

THREATS	SOURCES
Sedimentation	Inadequate forested buffer
	Unpaved roads
	Impervious surfaces
	Forestry practices
Fecal coliform	Septic tanks
	Lack of livestock exclusion
	Chicken litter storage and application methods
	Canada geese (other wildlife) using pastures
	*Cindy noted that data collection to determine 303(d)/305(b) listings are not done on a frequent enough to understand the changes (for better or worse) in habitat quality
	*We need to bring someone from EPD into this group
Low Biotic Integrity/Diversity in Headwater Streams	This is likely related to sedimentation
	Naturally low pH
Lack of public awareness/appreciation of the resource	Adult education programming lacking
	Lack of capacity for outreach
	NRCS application evaluation process
	Landowner fear of losing property rights/regulatory agencies
Lack of Data	Limited capacity (may be improving with addition of GA DNR Upper Coosa biologist, but what about GA EPD water quality testing frequency?)
Nonpoint Source Pollution	

Ammonia	Point sources (Dalton Utilities LAS, Murray County landfill, OM minerals) – only 2 permitted and both are in compliance
Aquatic connectivity	Road crossings (culverts), dams Berming of stream channel and lack of lateral connectivity to floodplain
Water temperature	Loss of hemlocks Loss of forested buffer area Privet invasion in buffer area
Floodplain development	Infrastructure impacts (ditches, utility development, etc.)

STRATEGIES AND ACTION ITEMS

1. Public Awareness, Education and Outreach

- Landowner and local involvement was expressed as a barrier for many
 - Programs, workshops, and restoration dollars are available but often it is difficult to find landowners that are willing to take part.
- Are there any ways the Conasauga River Alliance could play a role in outreach?
- Conasauga Cleanup could have more of an outreach component
- Cohutta Creek High School community outreach (teacher had to do a certain number of hours during the summer and then during the year – last year chose NRCS)
 - This could be a way to work with teachers on bringing local fauna and flora into the classrooms
- CRBI – focused in Floyd, Bartow, Paulding Counties; could replicate elementary-age focused curriculum in Murray, Whitfield Counties with a local partner individual
 - Someone will need to be trained on their curriculum.
- Dalton State College
 - This is a good way for groups represented here to speak with students at the college.
 - Environmental education component in teacher training program could be improved- Is there room for collaboration here?
 - Biology education program – opportunities for students to work with local teachers?
- TNACI has 7 summer internships available, currently.
- Snorkel hole field trips (Cherokee NF) – Can we replicate this program in Holly Creek?
- GA DNR Wildlife viewing program grant (\$3,000/project – could be leveraged with partner funds) – applications due Feb 1.

- Shade Your Stream workshops could be a good model to use in Holly Creek.
 - This program has created opportunity for collaboration among agencies and nonprofits, including NC State Cooperative Extension – landowner workshops, site identification, species lists, funding sources (FWS)
 - Small Scale Solutions to Eroding Streambanks (NC State Cooperative Extension)

Action Items:

- TNC
 - Connect with Dalton State to talk to students
 - UGA Extension – Connect with Kandi Edwards (Whitfield Co.)
 - Share CRBI program with John Lugthart and others who work with school-aged kids
 - Work with US FWS to coordinate a rapid watershed assessment walk
 - Who is interested (see sheet passed around)
- US FWS
 - Anita has requested \$100,000 for Conasauga watershed for Partners for Fish and Wildlife
 - What practices are being recommended? NRCS wants to know so they can promote within their incentives programs too
 - Need someone to contract with directly – UGA Ag Extension?
- Murray County Schools
 - UGA Ag Extension working to get in the door for some teacher trainings re: school gardens, etc.
 - We should invite someone from the school system to future meetings
- All – engage with local social media pages
 - Murray County Facebook site (Only in Murray County) – Ruth saw a lot of activity when the Forest Service posted an event on this page
 - Murray County 4H page (Brenda)
- UGA Ag Extension
 - Ag Day presence – add environmental component
- All – participate in Coosa-N GA Water Planning Council (ngwrc.org)
 - Find out who is on the Council

2. Protection/Restoration

Action Items

- NRCS Incentive programs
 - USFWS could offer to partner and provide land owner match (25%) for land owners unable to provide their own funds
 - NRCS will keep under consideration as evaluating sign-ups in 2018

- TNC could offer to pick up some projects that don't rank high enough within NRCS
 - TNC has had success with NRCS in Floyd county using this model
 - Cindy indicated that there may not be as much opportunity for that since they usually fund projects that have a large environmental impact
- **Rapid Watershed Assessment**: Alex will follow up with those who indicated they would like to be involved in updating the watershed assessment data
 - Likely will try to find a date in the spring