



## **RiverSmart—a new program to protect the Aspetuck River watershed**

The toughest problem in keeping American rivers clean for drinking or recreation purposes and fish life is—most people still believe—industrial discharges. However, the number one threat nationwide is, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), polluted runoff. Polluted runoff can contain fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, road salt and sand, erosion, waste from leaking septic systems and animals, and grease and chemicals from roads and parking lots.

It is of greater concern than most people realize and Litchfield County is no exception.

Given the size of the challenge, for the first time in Litchfield and New Haven Counties, four area land trusts, three river protection organizations and several concerned advocacy groups have joined forces to protect two key river systems and their watersheds in northwestern Connecticut: Litchfield County's East and West Aspetuck Rivers, which flow through five towns, and Pomperaug River, which flows through three towns in both Litchfield and New Haven Counties.

The challenge the new Aspetuck-Pomperaug River Partners ([www.APRiverPartners.org](http://www.APRiverPartners.org)) is taking on could affect the long-term health of these three key rivers for generations to come.

Generous grants from both the Connecticut Community Foundation and the Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation have enabled the alliance to get up and running within its first year with a river health awareness-raising campaign for residents, farmers and businesspeople who live and work in both watersheds.

### **AP River Partners**

Partners in launching AP River Partners include the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) Kent Land Trust, Lake Waramaug Task Force, Pomperaug River Watershed Coalition, Southbury Land Trust and the Southbury-based Audubon Center at Bent of the River, Steep Rock Association, Warren Land Trust, Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust and the Woodbury-based Flanders Nature Center.

In addition, Connecticut Farmland Trust, Rivers Alliance of Connecticut, New Milford's Pratt Nature Center and the Washington Art Association are participating in the effort.

"The combined experience, expertise and energy of all these groups working together for the first time represent a powerful resource to get this initiative underway for our rivers," says Lynn Werner, HVA Executive Director.

The Partners' ambitious immediate goal: accelerate protection of the three rivers, their feeder streams such as Sucker and Merryall brooks, and their watersheds in the seven-town swathe of

land that is home to more than 70,000 residents. Work will take place on three fronts: public education, river stewardship and, where feasible, watershed land preservation.

The education campaign will focus on steps people can take to protect and improve river health in their own backyards, on their farms or at their businesses. Strategies will include using [www.APRiverPartners.org](http://www.APRiverPartners.org) and social media to explain the harmful effects nutrient loading—often from fertilizer use—has on our rivers and the Long Island Sound; family river days; a land-owner backyard initiative to be “River Smart”; a business owner river steward challenge; and Aspetuck River health monitoring through volunteer water sampling programs that families can do together. It is none too soon.

Recent studies by both the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) and Trout Unlimited demonstrate that the West Aspetuck River has maintained a high water quality that supports native crayfish and the state’s dwindling native brook and wild brown trout populations. The West Aspetuck River is also New Milford’s only potential source of Class AA surface drinking water, the highest designation possible.

### **Impaired Water Quality**

However, according to CT DEEP, watersheds with 12 percent or more of impervious cover—buildings, roads and parking lots—that do not allow rainfall to percolate into the ground and flow into rivers, suffer impaired water quality. According to CT DEEP information, as of 2006, roughly 11 percent of the East Aspetuck and 7.5 percent of the West Aspetuck watersheds were developed. The risk continues to grow. According to the Litchfield Hills Greenprint, only 18 percent of the combined Aspetuck Watershed (5,951 out of 32,475 acres), for example, is permanently protected, the most effective way to preserve a river’s health. The remaining 82 percent is in the hands of private landowners—residents, farmers and businesses. They are making land use decisions every day with or without realizing how those decisions can either significantly worsen or reduce the impacts of polluted runoff on river health.

The Pomperaug River rests right at the water quality tipping point. As of 2006, 12 percent of its 90-square-mile watershed was classified as developed land. A little more land—usually valuable forests and agricultural fields—becomes developed with each passing year. Balancing the developed areas, nearly 11 percent of the Pomperaug watershed (6,192 out of 56,958 acres) is committed open space with more land targeted for permanent protection.

“Southbury Land Trust as well as Flanders Nature Center and Land Trust and the towns themselves have worked very hard to preserve land in the Pomperaug Watershed. However, this needs to be complimented with a campaign that increases awareness of those living or working in the Pomperaug watershed of the threat that polluted runoff poses to the Pomperaug River and its underlying aquifer, the source of drinking water for many residents in the community,” says Carol Haskins, Outreach Director for the Pomperaug River Watershed Coalition.

The Pomperaug River, like the Aspetuck River, represents a high quality water resource that supports a diverse fish population including American eel, brook trout and brown trout. Its future health is in the hands of people who live, work and recreate around the watershed. For further information or to get involved, go to [www.APRiverPartners.org](http://www.APRiverPartners.org), friend Aspetuck-Pomperaug River Partners on Facebook or call Lynn Werner at HVA at 860-672-6678.