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EHWA releases preliminary ‘state of the watershed’ report

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Editor

With their sights on a cooperative that will include business interests and environmental concerns, members of the Elk Headwaters Watershed Association released their preliminary “state of the watershed” report last week at Elk River Restaurant.

EHWA president George Bell said the plan arose after several stakeholders discussed their different views of the Elk’s overall health.

The EHWA has gotten funding from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and informational support from DEP non-point source coordinator Alvin Gayle, Bell said. In addition, the Pocahontas County Commission donated \$5000 to the cause last Tuesday and the Audobon Society’s TogetherGreen project has kicked in \$10,000.

According to the association’s summary document, the watershed is generally healthy, with abundant trout, optimal or suboptimal habitat scores and cold water temperatures.

However, Big Spring Fork watershed is “stressed,” compared to the others, the plan said.

“This is an opportunity for everybody—residents, farmers, fishermen, business people, property owners and business owners to join us to help make a conservation difference in the watershed,” Bell said. “We need more volunteers, we need more manpower to get this accomplished.”

Evan Hansen, president of Morgantown’s Downstream Strategies, developed the report and is working on the watershed plan.

“We were excited that the watershed association was looking to move past the controversy [concerning the Slaty Fork Wastewater Treatment Plant] to try to build common ground among the people who live and work in the Elk Headwaters,” Hansen said.

“It seemed like a great opportunity to us.”

While the embattled sewage treatment plant controversy that has lasted more than five years might have been the impetus for the plan, it is not the focus, Bell said.

Hansen said his crew collected data from the DEP, the watershed association and West Virginia University.

While Hansen reported that the watershed is generally quite healthy, supporting trout in many locations, the Big Spring Fork seems to be threatened compared with other streams in the watershed with worse biological scores greater amounts of sedimentation, which can also impact flooding frequency.

“Before things get even worse, this is a good time to stop that trend to make sure Big Spring Fork becomes as clean as the rest of the watershed,” Hansen said.

Hansen said the EHWA is “not talking about stopping development,” but rather talking about doing things in a different way and not causing further degradation to the streams in the Elk Watershed..

Flooding is related to development, he noted. The more roofs you put up the more driveways you pave, the faster the rain washes into the local streams, he said.

“If the local community decides they would like to do something about it, they can,” he said.

Although wastewater is not the focus of the study, the issue is “hard to ignore,” he continued.

“We thought our job was to look at the data and look at bacteria in the streams,” Hansen said. Bacteria levels are quite low, with a few exceptions on Big Spring Fork, he continued.

“Despite the fact we’re not finding super-high levels, it is still an important issue to deal with and get right,” he said.

The Audobon grant will fund the next stage—the process to link watershed protection with economic development. The EHWA will use the county commission’s contribution to collect more data and information.

Audobon liked the diverse group of people in a rural area that were coming together to protect their watershed, Hansen said.

“They recognized the condition of the watershed is right for protection rather than to be repaired,” Bell added.

EHWA member Gil Willis said this is a really unique area and one of the last wild places on the east coast, as well as a big nesting area for a lot of birds. Their territories are diminishing every year, he said.

County commissioner Martin Saffer said the Elk Headwaters project represents a change in perspective—to look at data and see what that data means instead of thinking a “project divorced from data can be successful.”

“Your data will require political decisions, your government is involved from the beginning,” he said.

Hansen said the final component is to develop the comprehensive watershed plan by taking the “community vision for the future, policies, management practices in the watershed to meet our goals.”

“There’s something special here,” he noted, “great trout fishing, great natural resources. So many things are happening in the Elk Headwaters.”

One of those things will be fundraising.

EHWA members intend to continue to seek funding from the Division of Natural Resources, the Audobon Society and the county commission to fund its efforts.

“The community is being proactive rather than waiting until we have to come back and fix it.

And I can only imagine that would take more money and energy,” Willis said. “This plan will hopefully help people understand a little bit more about how much water is here.”

“I think there’s a real need for it.”

Willis said he hoped that other watershed associations will follow the EHWA’s lead. He said he’d also like to see the Greenbrier have a watershed plan.

EHWA leaders hope their plan will be finished by next fall.

The first stakeholders meeting is set for December 2.

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