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Salmon Falls River pollution risk;Called No. 1 in nation for possible water quality loss

By JOHN NOLAN
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 Thursday, September 30, 2010

SANBORNVILLE — In a display of cross-border cooperation for the common good, about three dozen residents from Wakefield and Acton, Maine joined with water quality experts in Wakefield Opera House on Sept. 21, for an evening's discussion on how best to manage storm water in the watershed of the upper Salmon Falls River.



John Nolan/Times photo In the Wakefield Opera House, last week, water quality experts and members of Acton/Wakefield Watershed Alliance were taking suggestions from the audience on ways to spread the word about controlling storm-water to maintain high quality water in the lakes.

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During the meeting they were given the sobering news that the U.S. Forest Service regards this river as the most at-risk in the country for loss of water quality.

Various polluting particles, not the least of which is phosphorus, are posing a threat to the quality of the area's lakes and rivers. The water bodies — Great East Lake, Ivanhoe Lake, Wilson Lake and Horn Pond, which form the headwaters of the Salmon Falls River, and Lovell Lake, which drains into the Branch River (a tributary of the Salmon Falls River) are currently regarded as healthy, but are predicted to flip into decline as development increases, unless proactive measures are pursued.

Linda Schier, executive director of AWWA, commenced the Storm-water Management Project kickoff meeting last week with a recap of the group's summer activities. This included the application for and receipt of a grant worth \$8,500 from Piscataqua Region Estuaries Partnership (PREP) to pay for the consulting services of FB Environmental to provide expert science-based guidance on developing improved storm-water management policies and strategies. Derek Sowers of PREP was one of the officials in attendance at the meeting.

Salmon Falls River at risk

Schier made a couple significant announcements — firstly, that Great East Lake had quadrupled its blue-green algae this summer, with phosphorus on the bottom of the lake suspected as the cause, and, secondly, that of all the rivers in the United States, the Salmon Falls River watershed, according to the U.S. Forest Service, is the most at-risk water system in the nation, for loss of water quality due to development.

Schier, quoting the U.S. Forest Service information, said "The Salmon Falls River watershed is the third most-at-risk watershed in the nation for conversion of private forest land to developed areas. It is the No. 1 most-at-risk watershed in terms of the resulting impact on water quality."

Added Schier, "Acton and Wakefield are 70 percent forested at present. This (the U.S. Forest Service assessment) is pretty dramatic. The information needs to get out."

The difficulty of getting news out, if government officials overlook informing the local press, became clear during the meeting when a resident said that she had swum in Province Lake (in Wakefield, but outside the Salmon Falls River watershed) this summer and then discovered the water was odd. She felt the need to go home to shower and later discovered that the NH Department of Environment Services had declared it off limits for bathing due to the presence of potentially toxic cyanobacteria. The woman added that she knew of a man who had come out in a rash as a consequence of swimming in Province Lake during that period.

"It stayed out (off limits) for about a week," said Schier.

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Next to address the meeting was LaMarr Clannon of Maine's Non-point Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO). Her presentation started by stressing how storm-water runoff in urbanized areas averages around 55 percent, compared to only 10 percent where there is natural cover to help absorb it.

Runoff from such surfaces as parking lots and streets, too, contains petrol derivatives, sediments, nutrients, bacteria, pesticides, herbicides and heavy metals. Water running off hot-top has an additional pollutant — temperature. Being much warmer, it raises the temperature of rivers and lakes to the detriment of fish, and to the advantage of algae blooms.

Clannon also explained how easy it was for a lake to "flip" from clear to being cloudy with algae — all it needs is a relatively minute increase in phosphorus from 10 to 20 parts per billion. She emphasized the need for buffer protection, consisting of trees, shrubs, and undergrowth, around lakes.

She had the meeting attendees chant in unison several times, "A lawn is not a buffer!"

Clannon then, via her visual presentation, showed some very positive advances in storm-water control, from rain gardens to gravel parking lots to porous pavement. The Hannaford building in Augusta, Maine came in for special praise thanks to its "green" roof. The way forward, she said, was with better planning to accommodate inevitable growth, coupled with the permanent protection of green spaces.

Forrest Bell of FB Environmental was the next speaker, and recapped figures contained in the Salmon Falls Headwater Lakes Watershed Management Plan, which his company produced. The plan, running to around 200 pages, and crammed with facts, figures, maps, analyses and recommendations, was prepared at the behest of, and with much input from AWWA, thanks to state and federal grants.

"The growth rate for the area is 3.4 percent, which is pretty high," Bell said, and he reminded the audience of the best estimate for the two towns being totally built out — by 2041 for Acton and by 2054 for Wakefield.

If smarter development approaches and improved storm-water treatment methods are not achieved through public education and by strengthening protections through regulations initiated by the planning board of the two towns, the degradation of water quality in the five lakes and a consequent drop in surrounding property values is inevitable, the report explains.

Bell said that with best management practices in places, phosphorous loading in the lakes from new development can be reduced by a factor of almost 20.

"We want a storm-water working group to be guided by the two planning boards," said Schier, asking for volunteers from the audience and explaining that the task would involve looking at tools, ordinances and education to enhance storm-water control.

The meeting wound up towards 9 p.m. with the audience helping compile two lists — one being incentives for change and the other being barriers.

High on the "barrier" list was public apathy, a lack of understanding of the seriousness and immediacy of the storm-water runoff problem, and the fact that a proportion of the many summer residents around the lakes feel they have a diminished stake in town affairs as they pay property taxes but can't vote. On the incentive list was education through Wakefield's public access cable channel and the lake associations, and explaining that by keeping the lakes pristine, everyone in town (not living on the lakes) will benefit from a lower tax rate.

For much more on the Salmon Falls Headwater Lakes Watershed Management Plan, visit www.awwatersheds.org.

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