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Conservation leaders reflect on projects

By **Ron Morgan** Daily News Staff Writer



Celina Seftas, Huntingdon County Conservation District manager, paused from her busy schedule to share information about the many activities of the conservation district in 2017. Photo by RON MORGAN

The Huntingdon County Conservation District guided numerous environmental projects throughout the county in 2017 and looks forward to a busy new year, reports Celina Seftas, district manager.

Following up on the district's annual reorganization early this month, Seftas shared some insight into several initiatives aimed at protecting valuable soil and water resources in the county. At a recent interview with *The Daily News*, the district manager outlined planning activities and ongoing conservation efforts that cover a variety of environmental resources.

Conservation District officers retained for 2018 include: Huntingdon County Commissioner Jeff Thomas, chairman; Russell Kyper, Huntingdon, vice chairman; and Jim Weikert, Huntingdon, treasurer. Other district board members include Andrew Harpster, Spruce Creek, Michael Mowrer, Petersburg; Dr. Dennis Johnson, Alexandria; and Tyler Snider, Neelyton.

In other reorganization business, the board members agreed to continue to hold their monthly meetings on the first Thursday of the month, starting at 8 a.m. in the USDA Service Center in Walker Township, just south of Huntingdon.

Throughout the year the district handles critical issues involving agricultural land preservation, trash and tire cleanup activities, environmental education, water quality monitoring with a big emphasis on acid mine discharge (AMD) remediation on the Broad Top Coal Field, erosion control programs and much more, explained Seftas who has worked at the conservation district office for 10 years.

Beginning her third year as conservation district manager, Seftas told *The Daily News* that grant money brought into the county from several state and federal sources aided the district in 2017 to the tune of \$427,055. Among the funding sources include the state Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Growing Greener Program, Chesapeake Bay Special projects, Act 13 Funds and the federal office of Surface Mining.

Another very helpful environmental/rural road maintenance funding source which has benefited numerous

municipalities in the county include the state's Dirt & Gravel (low volume) Roads Program, reflecting a total of \$494,547 expended in the county last year, said the conservation district manager.

What follows is a summary of district activities which have aided in protecting the environment while supporting the local economy through conservation partnership initiatives.

Regarding Agricultural Land Preservation, the district remains active in preserving valuable land. To date, the county has nine easements covering 1,068 acres of valuable farmland. Funding for the program originates from the county commissioners' Marcellus Shale Legacy Fund, it was noted.

Also featured accomplishments in 2017 included the Warrior's Mark Run where 10,768 feet of streambank restoration work was carried out last year. The stream is a vital component of the Warriors Mark Run Watershed, Seftas pointed out.

Relying on three Growing Greener grants, along with the cooperation of four landowners the enhancements included two miles of streambank improvements where dairy, beef and crop farms are located.

Streambank fencing, and other environmental remediation activities help reduce sediment and nutrient runoff into Warriors Mark Run which is on Pennsylvania's list of impaired waterways. Allies in the initiative include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and several local partners.

Also, the conservation district applied for and received funds from the Chesapeake Bay Special Projects fund from which \$19,787 was allocated for two barnyard improvement projects intended to maintain water quality, particularly in farming areas.

Seftas also noted that \$59,769 has been earmarked for riparian area projects on four farms in the county.

"The funds will be used to construct streambank fencing that limits livestock access to streams," said Seftas.

In addition to Warriors Mark Run, the district is also focusing its attention on two other streams in the county: Saddler Creek in the Big Valley area; and Old Fort Run in the Shirleysburg area.

Other agricultural-related environmental work scheduled for 2018 centers around efforts to control barnyard runoff, manure storage practices and more streambank fencing, Seftas noted.

On the Broad Top, the conservation district continues its partnership with the Shoups Run Watershed Association in the preservation of local streams impacted by past coal mining activities. The watershed association enjoys an extensive list of accomplishments over the past decade dealing with AMD and flooding challenges on Shoups Run.

An AMD project at Minersville, Carbon Township, is over a decade old and had to be upgraded last summer. The work included the replacement of 1,000 tons of derelict limestone with a high calcium product. The material, along with accompanying settling ponds, remove acidity and metals from the water, including aluminum, iron and manganese. As a result, a small population of brook trout can be found in Miller's Run, explained Seftas.

The conservation district continues to monitor and provide maintenance for a series of AMD sites on Shoups Run. Funding to aid with the most recent improvements came from the federal Office of Surface Mining as well as some Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Section 319 monies.

Last year, the conservation district split a resource technician position into two positions: Erosion and Sediment (E&S) technician and the position of Dirt & Gravel Roads technician. The positions are handled by Taylor Clark (E&S technician) and Sherri Law (Dirt & Gravel Road technician), both graduates of Juniata College. Doug Stiffler, who has held the position of resource technician for nearly a dozen years, will continue to assist on a part-time basis, noted the conservation district manager.

Gathering more speed, the popular Dirt & Gravel Road Program has seen increases in funding sevenfold. What that means for qualifying D&G Road funding applicants is the availability of more money to help reduce rural road erosion that contribute to the pollution of nearby streams. “That means we will be able to do more projects,” Seftas said.

In 2017, the district completed 16 D&G Road projects throughout Huntingdon County.

Keeping the landscape of the county is another successful endeavor the district is proud of. Last year, members of the “Keep Huntingdon County Beautiful” partnership cleaned up 5.3 tons of trash and 160 tires from four miles of the Juniata River around Route 522 and Mount Union Bypass. The fifth annual cleanup relied on canoes and kayaks to complete some of the work. Several grants from various sources helped to fund the work.

In addition to various environmental education initiatives involving several local high schools and Juniata College—including the annual Huntingdon County Envirothon—the conservation district has launched a new website, huntingdoncd.org, which provides information to the public including program operations, conservation district staff contacts and educational programs and services.

Regarding the district’s educational accomplishments, Seftas noted that 1,423 students and adults benefited from various environmental education programs spearheaded by the conservation district.

Also, downloadable forms can be obtained by logging onto the website which is overseen by Stacia-Fe Gillen. The site was created through the assistance of Juniata College.

Among the district’s key project partners in projects last year included the United States Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state Department of Environmental Protection’s Growing Greener Program, federal Office of Service Mining, the Environmental Protection Agency’s Section 319 Program and farmers from the Warriors Mark Run Watershed.

For more information about various conservation district services, contact the Huntingdon County Conservation District office at 10605 Raystown Road, Suite A, Huntingdon, PA 16652- 7542. The telephone number is 627-1627.

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