

Somerset Conservation District earns environmental award



Photo by Page Wetterberg

Somerset Conservation District Manager Len Lichvar, left, and district board Chairman Roger Latuch display the district's Environmental Achievement Award for excellence in reducing abandoned mine drainage water impairments in Somerset County.

The Somerset Conservation District was awarded a national Environmental Achievement Award from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance recognizing the district for its contributions to abandoned mine drainage abatement efforts in the Lamberts Run watershed.

The award was presented at the National Association of Abandoned Mine Land Programs conference in Williamsburg, Virginia.

"This award recognizes the district's long-term commitment to natural resource conservation in Somerset County," district board Chairman Roger Latuch said.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation and the National Park Service's Flight 93 National Memorial were recognized with the same award.

Lamberts Run is a tributary to the Stonycreek River that has suffered from severe water quality degradation from historic abandoned surface and deep mining operations. Heavy loadings of iron and other metals rendered Lamberts Run severely impaired and also degraded the water quality of the Stonycreek River for much of the 20th century, according to the Conservation District.

The district, in cooperation with the Department of Environmental Protection, began planning for AMD treatment options in the 1990s as part of a larger effort to reduce AMD impacts in the Stonycreek River watershed.

With the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 on Sept. 11, 2001, at the headwaters of Lamberts Run, however, the dynamics of AMD abatement in the watershed changed.

The department, in cooperation with the park service, designed, funded and constructed a pump and treat AMD abatement project on the memorial property. The Somerset County Conservancy oversaw construction of a passive treatment system on another source of AMD on property it owns adjacent to the memorial. The Conservation District, in cooperation with department and the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts' Technical Assistance Group, then administered and constructed another system, known as the Hinemeyer AMD treatment system, on park service property that reduced AMD impacts further downstream.

With these successful efforts in the watershed, the district, in 2016 with assistance from Hedin Environmental and the Technical Assistance Group, then embarked on reducing the final source of AMD with the construction of an anoxic limestone drain treatment system near Lambertsville. This project, funded by the state, has significantly and successfully minimized the final source of iron contamination that had been entering and degrading the Stonycreek River, according to the district.

In order to further reduce the impacts on Lamberts Run, the district has applied for a Growing Greener grant for a second phase to the project. The district said the project has the potential to re-establish the brook trout population and fully secure water quality improvements in the upper Stonycreek River.

The district is continuing to work to rehabilitate four of the Oven Run AMD passive treatment systems on the Stonycreek River. Additional funding is required to completely reconstruct and enhance the performance of the systems, which are beginning to fail. Other aging treatment systems are maintained by small volunteer watershed organizations that struggle to continue keep them functioning.

“The Conservation District and these local groups continue to be the county’s first defenders in both the improving and the maintaining of the county’s essential water resources,” District Manager Len Lichvar said.

“Although much progress has been made in recreating fisheries, enhancing water quality and establishing the growing ecotourism sustainable economic impacts in the region, the public sector— driven initiatives to address remaining water quality issues as well as maintaining existing treatment facilities is both ongoing and never ending.”