



## **Urban Rivers Restoration Pilot Fact Sheet Blackstone-Woonasquatucket Rivers and Communities, Massachusetts and Rhode**

**BACKGROUND—**For the last 200 years, the Blackstone and Woonasquatucket Rivers have supported industries that in turn have discharged untreated wastewater into the surface waters. Over much of this period, people had little understanding of the impact of the contamination on human health and the environment. In 1981, a study by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection found the Blackstone to be “grossly polluted with heavy metals,” which was directly linked to the loss of fish and the degradation of wildlife habitat. Around the same time, the Woonasquatucket was found to contain actionable levels of dioxin in sediments and surface water that necessitated warnings against swimming in and eating fish from the lower section of the river. The population of the Blackstone and Woonasquatucket Rivers watersheds is 1 million. The area presents an extraordinary range of environmental and economic conditions—from pristine rural landscapes to densely populated urban neighborhoods to historic business districts.

**ACTIVITIES, AUTHORITY, AND FUNDING—**The Blackstone and Woonasquatucket American Heritage Rivers Urban Rivers Restoration Pilot seeks to showcase partnerships not only between the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), but also with other

federal agencies, state environmental agencies, chambers of commerce, tourism councils, and non-profit environmental groups. Some of the organizations already involved in the project include the National Park Service, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, Blackstone River Coalition, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, University of Massachusetts, Clark University, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Rhode Island Department of Transportation, and University of Rhode Island. The collaborative effort is focusing on restoring freshwater wetlands in Rhode Island, the first effort of its kind in the state; reducing the contaminant load into the Narragansett Bay from the Blackstone and Woonasquatucket Rivers; and connecting the permit work along the rivers for economic restoration of brownfields, bike path access to the river, and wastewater and hydro-electric facilities. All these efforts recognize that restoring the rivers to Class B fishable and swimmable by the years 2015 (Blackstone) and 2020 (Woonasquatucket) will require key partners to seek cleanup of the urban stretches of these rivers beyond

combined sewer overflow (CSO) and storm water improvements. Recently, Governors Carcieri (RI) and Romney (MA) agreed to a year 2015 cleanup goal for both rivers to directly address the Narragansett Bay Watershed.

The Blackstone River Watershed feasibility study was initiated in May 1999 in partnership with the Massachusetts EOE. The FY03 Energy and Water Development Appropriation provided \$140,000 for the study, which is continuing. In addition to funding brownfields assessments and cleanup of Superfund sites along the rivers, EPA has provided a \$25,000 grant to Blackstone Headwaters Coalition to coordinate community outreach to the City of Grafton, MA, related to the USACE feasibility study for Fisherville Pond. Outreach activities include providing the public with information, seeking community input in coordination with the Massachusetts EOE, and providing community input received to USACE. When the draft study is available, the Coalition will work with its partners to conduct public forums to review alternatives for the restoration of Fisherville Pond and the proposed redevelopment of the Fisherville Mill Site, which underwent a time-critical emergency response action. Data from a study, conducted by a local developer to determine feasibility of cleaning up and restoring the former mill to productive use, will also be available for these public forums.

EPA also has awarded a \$25,000 grant to the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council (WRWC), which will survey and sample properties along the river from the Towns of Johnston and North Providence (Centredale Manor Restoration Superfund Site) downstream to the City of Providence, RI. Additionally, the WRWC is partnering with

NRCS and a private landowner who has purchased the Rising Sun Dam, the last dam on the river before Narragansett Bay. The WRWC is exploring opportunities to restore the dam with provisions for fish passage with all parties involved.

#### **CONTACTS:**

EPA—Johanna Hunter, 617-918-1041

USACE—Chris Hatfield, 978-318-8520

Blackstone Headwaters Coalition—Peter Coffin, 508-753-6087

Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council—Jenny Pereira, 401-861-9046

