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NEWS RELEASE

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Eel River Headwaters Restoration Project, Plymouth, recognized with national Coastal America Partnership Award

NRCS joins federal, state and local partners in dedicating the project site

PLYMOUTH, Mass. (June 17, 2011) -- The completion of the Eel River Headwaters Restoration Project was celebrated today with a dedication ceremony and presentation of the nationally prestigious Coastal America Partnership Award to the project team. Deputy Assistant Secretary Eileen Sobeck of the U.S. Department of the Interior presented the award to representatives of the Town of Plymouth, federal and Massachusetts environmental agencies, environmental organizations, and local companies.

The project restored over 60 acres of habitat and two miles of headwater stream that had been extensively altered and degraded by human use. The restoration has made dramatic improvements to wetland and riverine habitat that resulted in new and more abundant fish and wildlife, helped the local ecology become more resilient to climate change, and enhanced public use of the conservation land.

The \$2 million project was funded through a variety of sources with major contributions provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program, U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection Section 319 Grant Program (through a partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency).

"The Eel River Headwaters Restoration Partnership is a model for the type of collaboration President Obama has called for in the America's Great Outdoors Initiative," said Eileen Sobeck, Department of the Interior Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. "It is this type of grassroots partnership that will protect and restore sensitive coastal areas for wildlife and people to enjoy."

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service treasures opportunities to help fund and assist projects that link conservation areas across working landscapes," said Eric Derleth of the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. "The outstanding collaboration of this team has protected and restored important coastal stream and wetland habitat for the benefit of wildlife and future generations in Massachusetts."

"Not only does the Eel River site have environmental importance, but it's also part of the rich history of the Town of Plymouth and the cranberry growing region of Southeastern Massachusetts," said Christine Clarke, Massachusetts State Conservationist for NRCS. "We're pleased to have provided nearly \$600,000 in federal Farm Bill funding for conservation easements and a portion of the restoration costs for the Eel River Preserve through the Wetlands Reserve Program. NRCS works to achieve the greatest wetland functions and optimum wildlife habitat on every acre enrolled in the WRP program."

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“Coastal ecosystems are among the Commonwealth’s most precious resources and the Eel River project demonstrates how the cooperation and innovation of partners – both public and private – can not only restore but revitalize these critical habitats,” said Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Richard K. Sullivan Jr.

“The restoration of the headwaters of Eel River is one of the most ambitious coastal restoration projects completed to date in New England,” said Mary Griffin, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game. “It is the largest Atlantic white cedar swamp restoration in the Commonwealth and includes a variety of restoration techniques in a single project area.”

"The Town of Plymouth is appreciative of the wonderful partnership that was developed among local, state and federal agencies to complete the Eel River Headwaters Restoration Project and looks forward to maintaining this partnership in the future to restore other wetlands and aquatic habitats in Plymouth," said David Gould, Environmental Resources Manager for the Town of Plymouth.

“From restoring fish passage to replacing the road crossings that help migrating frogs and salamanders, this project has reestablished the connections that make this region so important for conservation,” said Wayne Klockner, Executive Director of The Nature Conservancy in Massachusetts. “Restoration efforts like the work at Eel River are critical to preserving habitat, protecting our drinking water and providing recreational opportunities for local people.”

The project included naturalizing approximately 40 acres of retired cranberry bogs, as well as the removal of Sawmill Pond Dam, a large stone dam located downstream of the bogs. Now known as the Eel River Preserve, the area is managed by the Town of Plymouth for public use and benefit. Restoration techniques employed included stream channel and floodplain reconstruction, fill removal, extensive wetland plantings, rare-species habitat creation and enhancement, dam removals, and culvert replacements. The project took approximately five years to complete.

Restoration activities in the bogs included reconstruction of a natural stream channel, placement of in-stream habitat features, filling of artificial side channels, removal of berms and water control structures, and replacement of undersized culverts to enhance fish passage. Sawmill Pond Dam was removed to allow fish passage, and a new river channel and floodplain naturally reformed in the former impoundment.

Rare wetland plant communities have been reestablished. Over 24,000 plants including more than 17,000 Atlantic white cedar trees have been planted. “This is the first large scale restoration of this rare wetland type in Massachusetts,” said Tim Purinton, Director of DFG’s Division of Ecological Restoration.

Past agricultural activities resulted in the removal of trees, modification of the stream channel, and construction of upland berms and water control structures. The downstream dam was a barrier to fish migration and the impoundment affected habitat, water quality and natural riverine processes.

The Eel River Preserve was historically a wetland known as “Finney’s Meadow.” The river once flowed uninterrupted to the ocean and supported an array of wildlife. In the early 1800s, a series of mills and dams were constructed. Cranberry farming began in the late 1800s and continued until 2002. In 2006, Plymouth’s Community Preservation Committee purchased cranberry bogs from the Phoenix Cranberry Corporation and converted the entire area to public conservation land.

Project Partners included: Town of Plymouth, Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game, Massachusetts Division of Ecological Restoration, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Partners for Wildlife, U.S. Department of Agriculture - Natural Resource Conservation Service, American Rivers, The Nature Conservancy, Massachusetts Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership, Horsley Witten Group, Inter-fluve, Inc., Sumco Eco-Contracting, and the A.D. Makepeace Company.

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