

Watershed Farm & Forest

October 2006

Stewardship Programs of the Watershed Agricultural Council

Flood Response Issue

Water Where Water'd Never Been Before



This photo of Julian Drelich of USDA NRCS illustrates damage to the covered cattle feeding area at Bryan Allen's farm in Walton; the repaired facility is back in use this fall (below).



That one line seems to sum up the unfortunate reality of flood waters during this summer's storm event, which dropped close to thirteen inches of rain at the end of June. On Tuesday, June 27, the rain that came hard and fast to ground which was already soaked

combined with the Catskills' steep terrain to produce flash flooding that overwhelmed the tributaries and streams flowing through farms and towns in the region. Especially hard-hit areas were Franklin, Delhi, Hamden, Sidney and Walton. Also hit were the high peaks and basins fed by the Neversink in Sullivan County and localized areas in Greene County. While this article can't describe all the damage in watershed communities, it serves as a report on the response activities of the Watershed Agricultural Council and its Agricultural Program partners and tells the story on a few farms whose business and lives were affected by the flood.

When the water receded toward the end of the week, enough roads were open to allow newly formed Flood Response Teams to begin assessing the damage to cropland and watershed protection practices on participant farms. John Thurgood, Cornell Cooperative Extension Team Leader, facilitated a management team made up of the many agencies and people necessary to effectively carry out this work. This included Brian LaTourette of the Watershed Agricultural Council; Paul Cerosaletti, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Delaware County; Mike Clifford, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); Pam Mason, USDA Farm Service Agency; Graydon Dutcher, Scott Gladstone, Christine Pierson and the entire Stream Team from Delaware County Soil and Water Conservation District. Help was also provided by New York City DEP Agricultural and Stream Program staff and USDA NRCS Watershed Coordinator, Leon Brooks, whose first day on the job was the 27th. Talk about on-the-job-training!

Thurgood said of the response, "I was heartened by the fact that everyone was willing to give long hours and 110% to complete a large scope of work quickly." Hundreds of phone calls and site visits were necessary to assess the damage and prioritize repairs on area farms. As Brian LaTourette put it, "All hands were on deck with the single goal of making contact with each farm in the

program as well as with farms in the neighboring Susquehanna River basin." This inter-agency effort had a positive effect for many, since it aided the USDA Farm Service Agency in obtaining a baseline knowledge of which farms would be eligible for federal flood assistance programs. During the field assessments, farmers were provided with advice and information, including flood repair grant applications, handling of flood damaged crops, and regulations on debris removal from streams.

The Emergency Watershed Protection Program was simultaneously assessing streams as they affected roadways, so in addition to quantifying and estimating damage to best management practices and field crops, the Flood Response Teams were able to share information with town and county governments and assist the Farm Service Agency with funding applications.

On farm visits, Trish Westenbroek of Cornell Cooperative Extension said the common theme was that farmers were thankful for the small graces given. "Despite all the damage we saw, farmers across the board were worried that others might be worse off." With cows up to their bellies in water and little dry ground, animals were stressed and extra care had to be taken with mastitis and hoof health issues, compounding the already difficult problems of road access, crop loss, milking, dumping milk that couldn't be transported, and last but not least, just having a dry house to go back to. She added, simply, "Farmers were helping farmers."

The initial phone and mail survey of the Delaware River and Susquehanna River basin farmers located in Delaware County was completed for 369 farms. Fortunately, over one hundred farms reported no damage, so field assessments proceeded on 238 farms in the region. A list was then compiled of 137 best management practices in need of repair at a preliminary estimate of \$477,000. At the time of this writing, 24 of those were repaired, with 30 more in the works.

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So, what do all the numbers mean? Brian LaTourette observed that, “this repair work will impact our ability to accomplish all of the original 2006 implementation goals, but the repairs have to take priority. Farmers are contending with low milk prices, high fuel prices and their ability to survive and get quality feed crops will determine how they weather the winter.” At his own family’s farm, Brian commented that the stresses of the moment were made easier at the sight of familiar faces in the Agricultural Program who already know the operation and how best to tackle the repairs saying, “We appreciate the cooperation of farmers during this time.”

The Watershed Agricultural Program Flood Response Teams represent partners from the Delaware County Soil and Water Conservation District, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the USDA Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Watershed Agricultural Council, and NYC DEP.



Holley Hill Farm Digs Out From June Flood

On an October visit to Holley Hill Farm, the pumpkins in the field were plentiful, having been out of the way from Kerrs Creek, which jumped its banks during the June flood causing a lot of damage to most aspects of the farm: the stream bank, its buffers and the barnyard watershed protection practices. No stranger to extreme weather, Dave Holley said of the flooding, “It was a wild day. But we were lucky. We never lost power or any of our animals, though looking back, we did put ourselves in a lot of danger during the effort to save them.

We didn’t lose milk either. It could have been a lot worse.” The Holleys credit the former owner of the farm, Earl Sines, for preventing further harm to the cows in the barn. “He came right away and opened up a culvert so that the water would drain out of here fast.”

The stream buffer was destroyed over an 800 foot area, when the center of Kerrs Creek relocated about 50 feet. Concrete cattle slats were taken downstream while water flowed through both the

calf house and the barnyard nearby. With filter areas covered with gravel and debris, most of the best management practices in the Whole Farm Plan were not able to function as designed. Graydon Dutcher, Technical Coordinator for Delaware County SWCD, did the first damage assessment at Holley Hill. He said, “When I first got out there the scope of what needed to be done was a little overwhelming, considering the limited contractor availability, but once the word got out to the contractors, we were able to get going. The main concern was to get the stream back to its normal flow and location so that the farm could function again.”

Funding for emergency stream intervention was provided by the Watershed Agricultural Program. Delaware County assisted with the initial stream relocation until the repairs could be done. Meanwhile, Emergency Conservation Program funding covered 75% of the cost for Dave Holley to get the gravel cleaned off from the crop fields. Without access to pasture on the other side of the stream, the next step was to arrange for a temporary crossing. Lenny Perzorski, Resource Conservationist at USDA

NRCS, designed the fencing repair in order to maintain the stream buffer, and the stream crossing was relocated and rebuilt. The damaged barnyard subsurface drainage and filter area and diversion are next, and they will be repaired to their original specifications.

This first phase of repairs were being completed as the pumpkin harvest brightened the front entrance to the farm and the Holley’s reported record sales of their pumpkins over Columbus Day weekend. As the new cattle slats were being installed further downstream from the barnyard, Dave reflected on the new arrangement. “Overall, I believe we will be better off than before,” he said. “The brook has more capacity now, and will be able to flood into a larger plain when necessary.” Looking on the bright side, he said, “My wife is happy that there’s less lawn to cut back there.”



Cattle slats are relocated to a safer spot on Kerrs Creek after being dislodged by June’s floodwaters.



A Prime Season Lost at Healing Waters

On October 10, Dan Flaherty, Small Farms Coordinator, went out to Ken Schrider's Healing Waters Farm in Walton with the good news that replacement fencing is in the works to protect the farm's stream buffers. The owner described the devastation when Lower Third Brook widened in the flood, taking out all of the fencing, bridges and much of the pastureland along with it.

The entire stream buffer area was affected, which in turn affected every aspect of the farm operation. The first challenge was finding safe ground for the animals: ten lambs were saved from near drowning before the water peaked. The owner said, "In the beginning, we were working so hard to find ways to minimize the damage. After awhile, when it was clear that there was nothing we could do, we started down the road to help other people, since even with all this damage, we're still on some of the highest ground around."

With the flood over, a month of stress ensued: keeping livestock out of the stream buffer without fencing and feeding the animals hay while gravel prevented the growth of grass. Also, two major bridges washed downstream, leaving no cattle laneways to link the pastures. Additional challenges for Healing Waters came while trying to keep their retail presence at outside fairs and festivals going. "The damage to our farm came in every way, shape and form," said the owner.

Even so, they are grateful for small things. The house had a new roof (which had been tarped over at the time of the flood even when a foot of water was running through the basement!) and two extra helpers who were on the farm for the summer. Even a recent gesture from a faraway friend was appreciated: a \$50 Walmart card for some dry shoes.

But with the stream crossings out, fifty percent of all Healing Waters' agri-tourism activities were shut down during their busiest seasons of summer and fall when wagon rides customarily take visitors for a view on farm life here each year. Now three months after the flood, the farm is just getting back to a daily routine. Green grass can be seen on the pastures and the fencing is on its way.

The farm owners conveyed thanks for the response of the Watershed Agricultural Program, "They were here immediately. They were on the front lines, slogging through the mess, helping us figure out where point A is and to imagine how we can arrive at point B." In response, Dan Flaherty commented, "I appreciate how patient farmers have been while we're implementing the flood recovery, which has been difficult due to the shortage of contractors who are busy with town work. The bright spot for us has been the fencing contractors who rescheduled

their work to help with the repairs." Dan Flaherty was assisted in the work to assess stream buffer damage on many Small Farms by WAC's Rob Birdsall and Dan Deysenroth, along with Julian Drelich, Resource Conservationist with USDA NRCS.



Stream buffers and bridges were taken by Third Brook at Healing Waters Farm in Walton.

Forest-Based Businesses Under Water

In the weeks following the disastrous flooding in the New York City Watershed region and neighboring counties, the WAC Forestry Program and partners responded with assessments of several forest-based businesses to determine where the organization's resources could be most helpful in the clean-up efforts. The most significant damage occurred at two New York state operations: Pomeroy Lumber, by the Susquehanna River in Nineveh, a sawmill with annual production of 8 million board feet of hardwood

lumber (about 20% of which originates in the New York City watershed); and Indian Country, Inc., a manufacturer of panelized wood products that employs 92 people alongside the Delaware River in Deposit. The Forestry Grants Committee recently set aside nearly \$15,000 to provide grants to each business to aid in their flood recovery efforts.

Pomeroy Lumber under 6-10 feet of Susquehanna flood waters.



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Watershed Farmers Lose Crops and Soil

In Hamden, farms like Lucky Dog's vegetable operation and Tom Hutson's dairy, River Haven, suffered severe losses of both crops and topsoil. Richard Giles commented that, "We lost our crops, but the physical damage to the land hurt more." As further explanation, Hutson said, "We're on good soil, and the day after the flood was a hard thing to get through, but we're moving on." Replanting at Lucky Dog cannot compensate for the season's losses, but customer loyalty and support has been appreciated. A full article on Hamden farms working together,



in both flood times and dry, appeared in the July issue of Organic Farm Folks and Food, the Northeast Organic Farmers Association newsletter. Contact us at 607-865-7790 x119 or email info@nycwatershed.org for a copy.



Forage crops for cattle at River Haven Farm (top) and Lucky Dog Farm's lettuce were destroyed by flood waters in Hamden.

Watershed Farm & Forest is a newsletter of the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC), a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to support the economic viability of agriculture and forestry through the protection of water quality and the promotion of land conservation in the New York City Watershed region. WAC is funded by The New York City Department of Environmental Protection, USDA Forest Service, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and other federal, foundation and private sources. Letters to the Editor should be addressed to Karen Rauter, Communications Director. To reach the Watershed Agricultural Council, call: (607) 865-7790.

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