

## News

# Belter purchase protects Housatonic riverfront in Salisbury

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By Kathryn Boughton

[kboughton@ctcentral.com](mailto:kboughton@ctcentral.com)

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SALISBURY >> Three agencies interested in conservation came together recently to preserve 39 acres that stretch nearly a half mile along the western bank of the Housatonic River in Salisbury. The Salisbury Association, the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) and the John T. and Jane A. Wiederhold Foundation were key partners in the transaction.

The land, formerly owned by John and Joyce Belter, is at the heart of more than 11,800 acres of conserved land in the Appalachian National Scenic Trail Corridor and along the Source-to-Sound Housatonic River Greenway. It provides a wildlife corridor and riparian habitat for aquatic species that rely on the 2,250 feet of riverfront the property provides. The rest of the property contains active farm fields with prime and important statewide agricultural soils.

The parcel lies within the federally designated Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area, the federally designated Highlands Conservation Area, and a federal Forest Legacy Area. The Belter property forms a bridge between large conservation areas within the southern Taconic ridge.

Protecting this property will enhance what is now limited public access to the west bank of the river. It will also remove the threat of residential construction from a parcel with significant development potential at the head of the scenic Housatonic Gorge.

"It's a nice piece of land," said George Massey, co-chairman of the Salisbury Association Land Trust, which will own and manage the land. "What this will do is keep that land in agriculture. As owners we will have the kind of farming that will be respectful of the river — fertilizers and chemicals will be kept at an appropriate distance from the water."

Mr. Massey said the land is between Route 7 and the Housatonic River, a half mile south of Route 112, just below the Housatonic Valley Regional High School. It is currently being leased by the Jacquier family of East Canaan, large industrial farmers with a herd of nearly 1,000 milkers. The Jacquiers lease land throughout Western Connecticut and eastern New York State to generate food for their herd.

"Right now the land is in grass," Mr. Massey said, "which we are happy about."

He added that the Jacquiers will continue their use of the land through the remainder of their lease. "Right now they are in the midst of it," he said. "Then we will see. We have just gotten the land."

Mr. Massey reported that the land was purchased in part through the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration [representing the Connecticut DEEP], which provided \$335,000. The funds were allocated from a \$15 million fund derived from an October 2000 Consent Decree with General Electric, which agreed to clean up and/or pay for the remediation of PCB releases from the General Electric facility into the Housatonic River.

As part of this Consent Decree, General Electric paid over \$15 million in natural resource damages (NRD). This sum has been divided between the geographic regions of Massachusetts and Connecticut so that roughly half of the \$15 million will be available for restoration projects in each state. Many of the funds went to projects that were recreational in character, while others, like the acquisition of the Belter property in Salisbury, look at future preservation of the river's health.

The biggest chunk of the money comes from the grant project. There is actually something good coming out of the PCB problem," said Mr. Massey.

Additional funding for the Belter Land Protection Project came from the John T. and Jane A. Wiederhold Foundation, which provided \$150,000, and \$50,000 came from the Salisbury Association Land Trust. The \$335,000 NRD grant was procured by the HVA. The cooperation of former owners John and Joyce Belter in this project is much appreciated, Mr. Massey said.

"The HVA has been working on this sale," said Mr. Massey, "but it wasn't interested in owning the property. They don't see themselves as owners of property. We were there as someone willing to own and take care of the property forever. It's a desirable piece of farmland so people will be glad to farm it in a manner acceptable to us."

He said the Salisbury Land Trust will work with HVA to determine a farm management plan. While the plan will be open to amendment as circumstances change, he opined that it is unlikely it will be used for grazing animals. "There is no barn nearby," he explained. "Cows would be allowed and it's not an impossibility, but it's very good crop land."

USFWS Trustee Representative Molly Sperduto said, "We are pleased to assist the Housatonic Valley Association and the Salisbury Association Land Trust in their effort to conserve the Belter Property. Permanent protection of nearly one-half mile of riparian habitat along the Housatonic River benefits wildlife and people for future generations and helps offset the impacts of contamination in the river caused by the GE site in Massachusetts."

Lynn Werner, HVA executive director, noted, "Conserving this parcel helps protect the adjacent Appalachian National Scenic Trail Corridor and creates new river access for fishing, hiking and birding along this majestic scenic stretch of Housatonic River. We are thrilled by the partnership nurtured in the Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative and the Greenprint technical advice that helped complete this land conservation deal."

HVA Land Protection Director Elaine LaBella said, "Our goals are to create a footpath to the riverfront for the public to enjoy the river, and to allow the property to continue in be used for field crops or hay."

Harry White, Salisbury Association Land Trust conservation director, said, "This is one of the finest farm properties in Northwest Connecticut, with productive soils recharged by river flooding and its spectacular location between Sharon Mountain and Barrack Mountain. It is a remarkable addition to the trust's protected-areas catalog."

Mr. Massey said it is somewhat unusual for the Salisbury Land Trust to own properties. "We don't own that many, probably fewer than 400 acres," he said. "Mostly, we hold conservation easements and the owners manage the land. We have other farmland where the agreement says the owners will manage it according to the soil conservation plan."

He said that while the move to conserve land has not shown an upsurge in recent years, there is a "consistent movement in Northwest Connecticut."

"People who live here and who move here who have large properties like to see them remain large properties," he explained. "They are not interested in getting maximum development money."

John Belter remarked, "I think the entire Belter family is happy that this land will always be used for agriculture. I know that my dad and uncle, who farmed this land for so many years, are smiling.

"This was a very good cooperative project where each of the three organizations put in different amounts of expertise and finance," said Mr. Massey. "The best outcome is for this property to stay farmland and be carefully managed.

This is the second parcel protected with NRD funds secured by HVA.

The John T. and Jane A. Wiederhold Foundation was established in 1998 through a gift from John T. and Jane A. Wiederhold. The foundation is committed to bettering the lives of domesticated and undomesticated animals, including supporting the efforts of animal rescue and land conservation organizations and advances in veterinary medicine. The Wiederhold Foundation is a supporting organization of The Community Foundation of Northwest Connecticut.

The Salisbury Association Land Trust, organized in 1975, is a conservation organization dedicated to preserving the rural character of the town, including farmland, public vistas, and critical habitats. The land trust works with interested land owners to establish conservation protection of their properties.

HVA, a tri-state nonprofit citizen's environmental group founded in 1941, works to conserve the natural character and environmental health of its communities by protecting and restoring the land and waters of the 2,000-square-mile Housatonic watershed from its source in the Pittsfield, Massachusetts area to Long Island Sound. HVA has offices in South Lee, Massachusetts; Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut; and Wassaic, New York. For more information on HVA, [visitwww.hvatoday.org](http://www.hvatoday.org).

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