

Reclaiming the river

PCB MONEY RESTORES ACCESS, FISHERIES AND RIVERBANK, ENDING DECADES OF NEGLECT ON THE HOUSATONIC RIVER

BY STEVE BARLOW
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

The federal government awarded \$7 million in "natural resource damages" in Connecticut as compensation for PCB pollution of the Housatonic River.

An update on where 34 grant-funded projects stand:



Salmon Creek in Salisbury.

grant helped to finance a conservation easement. Other money came from Salisbury Land Trust and the Trustees of Reservations, which operates Bartholomew's Cobble immediately upstream in Massachusetts.

The grant also paid for an easement on the 20-acre Grossman farm on Weatogue Road, and there is money left to protect other properties. The Nature Conservancy hopes to wrap up talks with other landowners by March.

2. Salisbury: Salmon Creek meanders through lush, green hills and fields of grazing cows. Therein lies the rub: It's too tranquil. "For good habitat, you need deeper pools and a diversity of flow," said Tracy Brown, North-east restoration coordinator for Trout Unlimited.

Dead trees and limbs produce that flow when they fall into the water and create logjams. But the hayfields and pastures that paint this bucolic scene deprive the stream of a natural canopy. A \$617,260 grant will fund the building and installation of wood structures that will mimic natural logjams to make the creek more hospitable to native brook and wild brown trout. Working with 11 landowners, Trout Unlimited has identified 24 areas for imitation logjams along six miles.

The project also will replace invasive vegetation with native plants and repair erosion damage. Brown expects work on the \$1.2 million project to begin this month.

3. Canaan: A proposal to breach an old dam and build a fish bypass on the Blackberry River in East Canaan was abandoned after the state determined an old bridge used to reach the site was incapable of handling heavy equipment required for the job. The \$650,000 grant was returned to the pool.

4. Sharon: Open water created by beaver dams lure other wildlife, especially ducks and bitterns that call the Elaine Miles Wildlife Sanctuary home.

But the lodges on Carse Brook can also cause problems, including submerging a section of hiking trail at the 1,000-acre sanctuary. A \$36,000 grant paid for a system of water pipes, called water elevators, through the dam to control flooding.

"The trail has re-emerged from the depths," said Mike Dudek, land manager for Sharon Audubon.

The grant also paid for nest boxes and wood duck boxes. And for the first

time, Sharon Audubon sprayed herbicides in 2013 to fight phragmites, an invasive reed. A second application is scheduled for this month, with a third spraying next year.

5. West Cornwall: Boaters and kayakers know it as "The Bend" or "Garbage Hole," the site a few hundred feet downstream from the covered bridge where they can launch themselves into the Housatonic.

The small, dirt parking lot and boat launch sit next to the town's library on land owned by CL&P, which allows public use.

With a \$222,586 grant, the Housatonic Valley Association wants to improve parking, repair the heavily eroded boat launch and make it handicapped-accessible, curb run-off and install toilets. HVA, the town and CL&P are discussing the future maintenance of the site.

Elaine LaBella, director of land protection for HVA, said if all the issues can be resolved, work could start next year.

6. Sharon: A kettle, a depression gouged out centuries ago by retreating glaciers that exposed the water table, is a pond with no outlet. It's ecologically unique and ideal for frogs, salamanders and other amphibians. There is a kettle pond on the 21-acre Frost Farm, which abuts the Housatonic. A 2013 conservation easement, paid for with part of a \$740,468 grant obtained by HVA and the Sharon Land Trust, means the farm will be protected. Other money came from the Newman's Own Foundation, the Cornwall Conservation Trust and private donors.

"The interesting thing is that even though the land is in Sharon, the Cornwall Trust recognized this was important for their town," said Tim Abbott, Greenprint director for the HVA.

Another \$335,000 from the grant, along with other funds, purchased a conservation easement for a 38-acre riverside meadow owned by John and Joyce Belter in Salisbury. The agreement will protect another 1,292 feet of riverfront and give anglers and hikers access to the river. The bulk of the parcel still will be farmed.

7. Cornwall: Furnace Brook tumbles underneath Route 4 just before the highway bisects Route 7, a short distance from where the stream merges with the Housatonic. Its cooler waters offer refuge for trout in summer, but the fishway added to the culvert in 1995 has been damaged by flooding and is now too steep.

"This is an incredibly important spawning stream for native trout," said Mike Jastrzemski, water protection manager for HVA. A \$73,000 grant will repair the fishway to make it more navigable and better able to withstand future flooding. HVA will also monitor fish populations and restore native vegetation to the surrounding banks. The work is expected to begin this month.

8. Kent: When it applied for \$250,000 to build a boat launch on the Housatonic off North Kent Road, the town noted it would be the only river access between Cornwall Bridge and Bull's Bridge, and that it would improve river access for emergency personnel. The plan called for building a short road, a small parking area, the boat launch and a scenic overlook at an old bridge abutment.

The town's interest has evaporated since then, and the project was turned over to HVA this year. "It's been on our plate for five years, and I didn't have the willpower, interest or whatever to pursue it," said First Selectman Bruce K. Adams, who took office after the grant was approved. "(In 2012) we had a major issue with an influx of people on the Housatonic in Bull's Bridge, and I

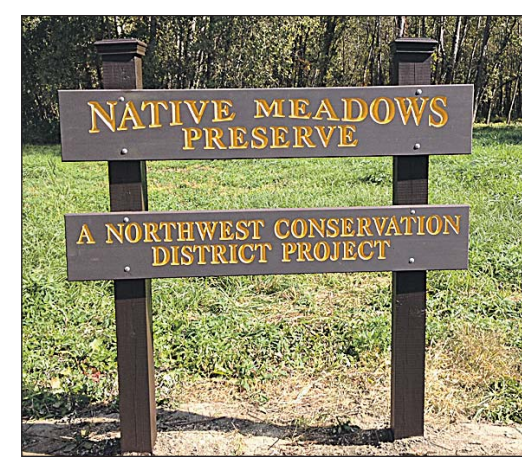
come a favorite hangout for bird-watchers.

14. New Milford: Sega Meadows Park sits on 23 acres on the east side of the Housatonic, a short distance north of downtown. The land was largely undeveloped and unused since it was given to the town in 1992, but a grant of \$75,217 has funded nature trails, picnic tables, benches and information kiosks.

A 1.3-mile road for bicycling and dog-walking was completed in 2012.

Eleanor Covelli, assistant director of Parks and Recreation in New Milford, said she hopes more invasive species control and the construction of a fishing dock will be finished this year.

15. New Milford: Since the early 1700s, when natives refused to sell the land to white settlers, the 25 acres of open space immediately north of Veterans Bridge has been known as Indian Fields. The parcel is now named the more politically correct Native Meadows Preserve.



Native Meadows Preserve in New Milford.

Where former owners once had plans for a nine-hole golf course, the Northwest Conservation District has created an oasis where hikers can spy warblers, songbirds and kingfishers. The land was bought through a \$348,000 grant, which also paid to build a small network of trails and to eradicate invasive plants. Permits are being obtained to build a small parking area.

"We want to get a conservation easement ... and ultimately hand it over to the town," said Mike Morin of the NWCD. He expects the project to be completed by next year.

16. New Milford: The Young's Field River Walk would be a half-mile-long hiking path along the Housatonic from Veterans Park to Helen Marx Park. A \$180,000 grant also would pay to stabilize banks and remove invasive plants. Flooding in recent years, though, has changed the topography along the river, especially near its juncture with the West Aspetuck River, and necessitated a redesign of the project, said Tammy Reardon, the mayor's administrative aide. Reardon said she hopes work can begin next summer.

17. Roxbury: When he was president of the Naugatuck-Pomperaug Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Bob Perrella spearheaded a project to repair the eroded banks of Jack's Brook and restore a trout population to the Shepaug River tributary. A \$7,500 grant was approved.

Perrella, whose tenure as president ended three years ago, is no longer a member. Meanwhile, work stalled. "We do not have the money to front the project. Therefore, nothing has been done," said the current chapter president, Steve Farnham.

Farnham said he has talked with Roxbury officials about the town getting involved.

18. New Milford: The Housatonic Valley River Trail was envisioned as a series of boat launches and portages that would trace the Still River from Danbury to its confluence with the Housatonic and on to Long Island Sound. A \$56,020 grant was approved for King's Mark, a regional planning agency, to build a boat launch behind the New Milford Animal Shelter as part of the trail.

Shortly after the grant was approved, though, King's Mark lost most of its state funding and dissolved, said Peg Daley, former vice chairman of the group.

The New Milford project was taken over this spring by HVA, which is assessing whether the funding is adequate.

19. Southbury: Erosion has eaten away so badly at a steep bank separating Ballantine Park from the Pomperaug River that town officials fear a basketball court will eventually be undermined. Already, two trees have tumbled into the water and a fence post has been exposed.

This summer, the town hired the Cheshire engineering firm of Milone & MacBroom to design a plan to restore the bank and prevent future erosion.

The town will need to obtain the necessary permits before the project, funded by a \$180,000 grant, can be put to bid.

20. New Fairfield: Ball Pond and Short Woods brooks are the two largest tributaries flowing into Candlewood Lake, a man-made body of water created by pumping in water from the Housatonic.

The town and the New Fairfield Land Trust were approved for a \$150,000 grant to repair eroded banks, replace invasive species with native vegetation, and build trails, handicapped-accessible walk-

ways and information kiosks on 32 acres in the center of town.

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21. Southbury: Transylvania Brook empties

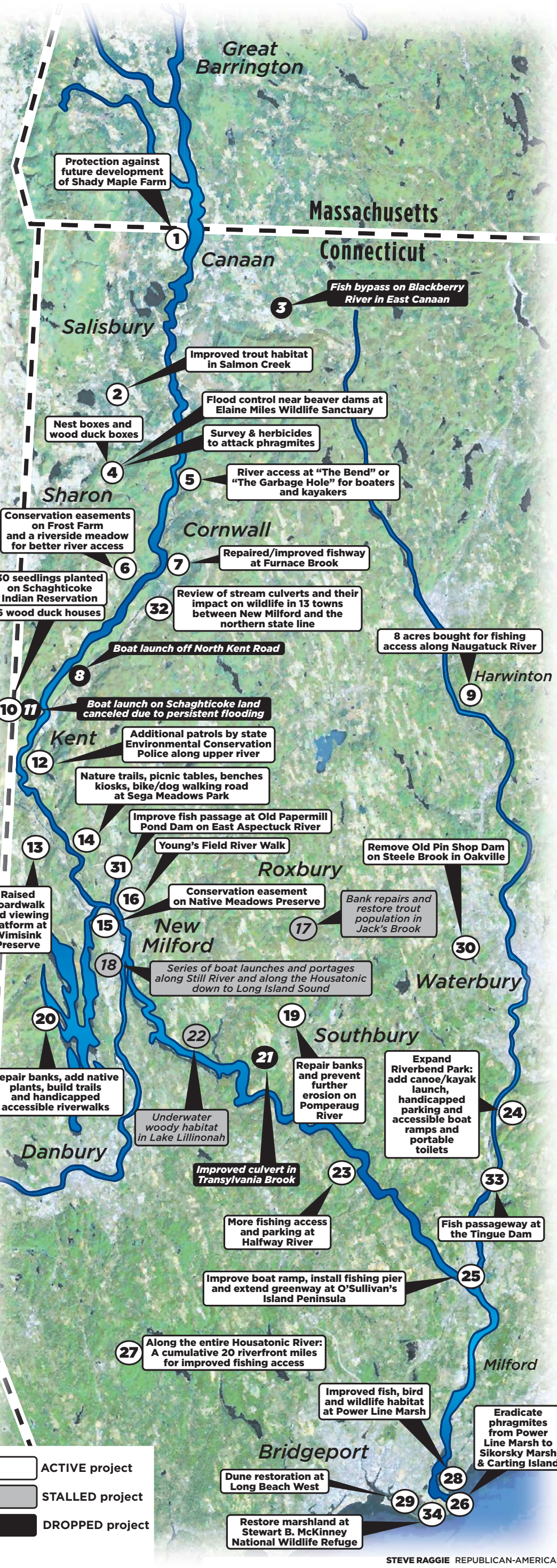
from a culvert underneath East Flat Hill Road that is nearly 1 foot higher than the normal stream flow, creating an impassable barrier for fish. The town sought \$450,000 to replace the culvert, but received a grant of \$40,000. Southbury officials feel this isn't enough to cover all of the necessary work. Carol S. Hubert, the first selectman's chief of staff, said the town hopes to be able to transfer the money to another project.

22. Bridgewater: For boaters piloting Lake Lillinonah, floating debris such as downed trees and limbs is something to avoid. In the past, the state has conducted skimming operations to rid the lake of the hazard.

Yet the same debris, after it becomes waterlogged and sinks, becomes what's known as coarse woody habitat. It's a great hangout for fish, especially bass.

Connecticut B.A.S.S. Nation proposed building artificial coarse woody habitat, and to submerge and anchor it in the lake. A \$46,050 grant was approved. Little progress has been made, though, because of confusion over the funding.

"We never got the money,"



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said Sylvia Morris, who took over as president two years ago after her predecessor died unexpectedly.

"We did all the forms. I thought we had done it right," said David Santos, the group's former environmental director.

The NRD money, though, isn't released until work has been done, said Molly Sperduto of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

"The money is still there that was designated for the project," she said. "We need to reach out and let them know."

23. Newtown: The Halfway River forms the boundary between Newtown and Monroe just north of the Stevenson Dam on the Housatonic. It has a robust population of wild brown trout and "the cleanest and coldest water in the area," said Rob Sibley, Newtown's deputy director of land use.

The town used a \$326,400 grant to purchase 12 acres in 2009, protecting 1,200 feet of river frontage and providing fishing access.

The project includes construction of a small parking area along highly traveled Route 34. The state DOT has not yet given its OK.

"It's not an easy road to make a curb cut because of the curve of the road and it's going downhill," said Sibley, who nonetheless predicts it will get done within two years.

24. Beacon Falls: When Beacon Falls applied for a grant in 2007, the money was sought to help convert two vacant lots and another lot donated by O&G into a 1-acre riverside park. Riverbend Park opened in 2009, so the \$100,000 yet to be received is now targeted for enlarging and enhancing the park.

"The plan is to expand the park by three lots," said Joe Rodrigo, the finance board member who is the project overseer.

The town intends to put in a canoe/kayak launch, add handicapped parking, create two handicapped-accessible boat ramps, remove invasive plants and add handicapped-accessible porta-toilets. Rodrigo hopes work can begin next year.

25. Derby: O'Sullivan's Island Peninsula is the last strip of land that separates the Housatonic and Naugatuck rivers. The Valley Council of Governments wants to turn it into a fisherman's paradise as Atlantic salmon, walleyed pike and striped bass are plentiful in the surrounding waters.

A \$325,000 grant was approved to improve the existing boat ramp, install a handicapped-accessible fishing pier and extend the existing greenway.

The holdup has been the completion of an environmental assessment of the 10.5-acre site.

"We already know we have pockets of (contaminated) soil that have to come out," said Arthur Bogen, the council's environmental planner.

He expects the assessment to be done late this fall. The scope of any cleanup would largely determine when the project can be put to bid.

26. Stratford/Milford: Phragmites, or common reed, is an invasive species that can grow as high as 20 feet and consume hundreds of acres. Its dense stands choke native vegetation and spoil the habitat for wildlife including mink and osprey.

The DEEP Wetlands Habitat and Mosquito Management Unit is eradicating 500 coastline acres of phragmites from marshes in Milford and Stratford. Funded by a \$963,313 grant, the three-year process involves spraying herbicides in summer and mowing in winter. The project's third phase should be completed within the coming year, said DEEP wildlife biologist Robin Adamcewicz. "Afterward, the native vegetation will typically return," she said.

27. Along the Housatonic: During the past 30 years, miles of fishing access have been lost due to development along the Housatonic and the posting of private property, according to the DEEP. A \$900,000 grant was approved to acquire 20 riverfront miles of recreation access easements and 1.3 miles of cold-water conservation easements. The project's timeline is roughly four years.

"We have not moved forward on that as of yet," said DEEP biologist Adamcewicz. "It was very ambitious and we have had to scale it back somewhat due to staffing issues."

Work should start this fall, DEEP's Adamcewicz said.

29. Stratford: Long Beach West is a 35-acre undeveloped beach owned primarily by Stratford. In 2010, a dune restoration began with the bulldozing of several cottages. DEEP was approved for a \$40,000 grant to eradicate phragmites and other invasive species, and to level the marsh surface to encourage the growth of native plants. The necessary permits are being obtained, Adamcewicz said.

30. Watertown: In 2005, the state ordered the owners of the Old Pin Shop in Oakville to repair their 87-year-old dam on Steele Brook, which holds back a pond full of polluted sediment alongside Route 73.

The worry is that a dam failure would empty the shallow pond and unleash contamination downstream and eventually into the Naugatuck River two miles below.

Maurice Fabiani, whose family owns the dam, has proposed the removal of the spillway, construction of a riprapped channel with fish weirs through the pond and the disposal of about 15,000 cubic yards of sediment. A \$700,000 grant was approved for the project, augmenting \$600,000 that the Fabianis have pledged.

The project has the necessary state permits and awaits authorization by the Army Corps of Engineers, said Peter Spangenberg, a civil engineer with DEEP. The final grant paperwork should be wrapped up by spring, said Drew Major of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Breaching the dam would reopen 4.6 miles of stream to American shad and sea-run brown trout, among other species. The owners have agreed to donate a portion of the land to the town for a proposed greenway along Steele Brook.

31. New Milford: The Old Papermill Pond Dam blocks passage of trout and other migrating fish on the East Aspetuck River, a state-designated wild trout management area. The Ousatonic Fish and Game Protective Association was approved for a \$100,000 grant to evaluate options to provide fish passage. Ousatonic president Mark Hanrahan said his group is talking with engineers about a solution.

"It could be up to and include the removal of the dam," said Hanrahan, "if the cost is doable and it's for the best environmentally."

32. Cornwall: Hundreds of culverts carry streams under roads and bridges in Northwestern Connecticut. Since last spring, two Housatonic Valley Association staffers and two volunteers have been analyzing each one. Funded by a \$150,000 grant, they are assessing the

barrier each culvert may pose to fish and other wildlife.

The goal is to come up with designs for new culverts that will allow native brook trout and other species to migrate to cooler waters in summertime.

The HVA team is working culvert by culvert in 13 towns between New Milford and the state line. A similar evaluation in Berkshire

County, Mass., was completed last year, and Connecticut's should require a couple of years.

Towns will then be able to use the information to set priorities for road work, and HVA also hopes to find more funding to create a pool for culvert replacements.

33. Seymour: The Naugatuck River pours over the Tingle Dam downtown, unnoticed by motorists speeding overhead on elevated Route 8. To fish, though, it's the largest and last barrier remaining on the river south of Thomaston.

Construction of a new fish passageway is expected to be completed this month. The \$5.4-million project is being paid for with federal and state funds, as well as a \$672,000 grant. There are some 60 fishways in the state, but this one will be unique. While the rest are mostly steel and concrete, the Tingle fishway will be a channel of natural rock intended to mimic rapids.

American shad, river herring, sea-run brown trout, sea lamprey and American eel will regain access to nearly 25 miles of river for spawning. Other species also will benefit. "Trout, bass, white suckers, even though they don't have to migrate, they do have to move around. This will let them do that," said Steve Gebhard, supervising fisheries biologist for DEEP. "Minnows and nongame fish can't use other fishways, but even smaller fish will be able to use this one."

The project will create a small park alongside the fishway in the center of town.

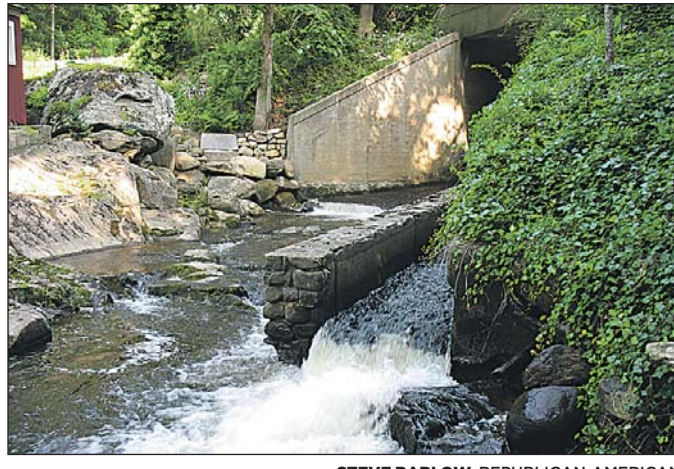
34. Stratford: The Great Marsh Unit of Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge covers 492 acres, including the largest unditched saltwater high marsh, or one left in its

natural state, without drainage, in Connecticut. Funded partly by a \$360,000 grant, DEEP and other agencies want to restore the marsh by constructing tidal channels, removing berms and filling dumped on the marsh in the past, and eradicating invasive vegetation. A draft restoration plan and environmental assessment are being prepared this summer. After a public comment period and the release of the final plan, work could begin possibly in late 2015.



Construction on a fish passage at Tingle Dam in Seymour.

DEEP



Furnace Brook in Cornwall.

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The foundation of the Hopkins & Alfred clock factory from the early 1800s in Canbyville.



NAROMI LAND TRUST

The Wimisink Preserve in Sherman.