

■ Opinion: Guest Editorials

Connecticut needs its rivers

By **Laura Hart and
Tim Palmer**

Oct. 2 marked the 50th anniversary of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which presents a good opportunity to redouble our efforts to keep the finest streams intact.

The Farmington River has played prominently in this national conservation initiative. Dams and diversions were proposed in the 1980s, but citizens and local organizations fought to protect the river. As a result, Congress added the West Branch to the Wild and Scenic system in 1994. This halted the threat that could otherwise have depleted healthy flows.

The West Branch was among the first rivers Congress designated Wild and Scenic under a "partnership" model, which recognizes the riverfront is mostly in private ownership and will remain that way. The Upper Farmington River Management Plan was adopted in 1993 and serves as a stewardship and guidance document for all members of the Farmington River Coordinating Committee. Members are from the five riverfront towns: Barkhamsted, Canton, Colebrook, Hartland and New Hartford, organizations, and

state and federal government. This means local control, yet important safeguards of the federal system are still guaranteed, including a ban on new dams and on major diversions of water.

Fundamental to passage of the original Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was the central tenant of balance; 70,000 dams had been built on virtually every major river in America, while thousands more were planned or under construction. Starting in the 1700s in Connecticut, dams had permanently flooded valleys, stopped the migration of Atlantic salmon and other fish, eliminated wildlife habitat, raised water temperatures to levels lethal to fish, and depleted flows for miles below some of the impoundments.

Nationwide, nearly all the sites that made economic or hydrologic sense had already been dammed, yet the momentum to pour more concrete continued owing to the flow of money to the dam-building industry. Authors of the Wild and Scenic Act recognized that without a program dedicated to setting aside our best remaining waterways, little of the natural value in rivers would be left for future generations.

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act bars dams on designated sec-

tions of rivers, and it also requires that plans be prepared to address how each stream's outstanding qualities can be conserved. Federal regulation of private land is not allowed, so local government initiative is encouraged to minimize development on floodplains.

The Eightmile River of southern Connecticut was likewise included in the National Wild and Scenic system with strong local support in 2008. Residents' concern for the entire watershed of that stream was reflected with the inclusion of tributaries in the river management plan.

Wild and Scenic status has served us well. Who would have wanted to see the waters of the Farmington cut to an overheated remnant of what we now know? With rivers and their natural corridors intact, everyone can enjoy fishing, paddling, hiking, hunting, and escape to the natural world right here near our own backyards.

And there is more to be done. The Farmington River Watershed Association supports extending Wild and Scenic status into the Lower Farmington and Salmon Brook. After partners worked together on a five-year Wild and Scenic Study, Representative Esty

and Senator Murphy introduced bills to designate the lower river for 37 miles and Salmon Brook for 26 miles. Local support remains important as the congressional process unfolds.

Other rivers in Connecticut deserve protection as well. The Housatonic Valley Association supports Wild and Scenic status for that classic New England river in western Connecticut. And action to safeguard our streams doesn't have to be through the Wild and Scenic Rivers system; local initiatives of many kinds can benefit streams statewide.

Today, we owe a debt of gratitude to the river advocates who assured that the Farmington, Eightmile, and hundreds of other waterways across America would continue to flow free as part of America's Wild and Scenic Rivers system. Likewise, the next generation will thank us if we pass on an inheritance of rivers, streams and watersheds that highlight the best that Connecticut has to offer.

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