

NEWS

Celebrating the Sesuit Creek Restoration Project

Nicole Muller

Published 12:01 a.m. CT Oct. 20, 2009 | Updated 7:15 p.m. CT Oct. 20, 2009

It's not every day that officials from about a dozen state and federal agencies congregate in the Dennis selectmen's meeting room.

But Monday was no ordinary day. It was the target set by Coastal America to recognize the team that saw the Sesuit Creek-Bridge Street Salt Marsh Restoration Project to its completion in June 2008. Representatives from each agency, citizens of Dennis, the town's engineering, natural resources, public works and water departments and conservation consultant Peggy Fantozzi were among those receiving the Coastal America 2008 Partnership Award.

The contributions of Bernard McCourt of Mass Highway, Maggie Geist and Tara Nye of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod, Rep. Cleon Turner, D-Dennis, and Sen. Rob O'Leary, D-Barnstable, were also recognized.

Coastal America is a partnership of federal, state, local and private resources working to protect and restore the marine environment. "In 1997 we established the Partnership Award as the highest honor the President of the United States bestows to a group like this. This project is a wonderful example of identified community needs matching up with the partnership to plan, fund and execute a wetlands restoration project," said Coastal America's founding director Virginia Trippie.

Sesuit Creek is the largest salt-marsh restoration ever completed in Massachusetts. Partners provided technical assistance to assure the successful completion of a nearly 65-acre, \$1.5-million project with a significant migrating fish component. "This is an extraordinary example of a partnership meeting its ecological goals," Trippie said. "You restored a significant habitat and improved the health of this watershed. You set an example that others should emulate."

George Macdonald, retired director of Natural Resources in Dennis, said the project dates to a late 1990s Army Corps of Engineers report on Cape Cod's threatened salt marshes. "The upland side of Sesuit Creek was a seriously degraded wetland and Bridge Street had begun to deteriorate because the culvert pipe was too small," Macdonald said. "The culvert was about to collapse and take the road with it."

A "quick fix" would have been faster and cheaper, Macdonald said. He applauded towns officials and residents for insisting on "doing it right."

“We put in larger culverts to improve water flow, restoring the salt marsh, reducing invasive species and improving the herring run to Scargo Lake,” he said.

Twice Dennis residents unanimously approved appropriating \$100,000 to match available grants. Private citizens raised additional funds for the installation of underground power lines and esthetic improvements.

Thomas Chapman of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service New England office said the restoration protects a large array of wildlife and allows several species of high-priority fish unobstructed passage to Scargo Lake, an important spawning habitat.

Steve Murawski, chief science adviser for NOAA Fisheries, called New England salt marshes “precious gems” and commended all who had a hand in reversing the troubled habitat of alewife and blue-back herring and improving soft-shell-clam productivity in the area. “Your work changes that wetland in a dramatic way,” Murowski said. “In June, President Obama encouraged us to become more involved with restorations like this.”

In closing, Murawski read a letter from Obama, who called the project “an outstanding environmental victory achieved for the Cape Cod shore, a vital coastal ecosystem.”

Nicole Muller can be reached at nmuller@cnc.com.