

Merrimack River water quality being tested

By Cara Spilsbury
Staff Writer

April 02, 2008 03:49 pm

The Merrimack River has been a lifeline to Greater Haverhill since the city was settled, but now it needs our help in return.

The Merrimack River connects the Queen Slipper City and other towns in Merrimack Valley to the Atlantic Ocean, and supplies drinking water to some 300,000 people as it rushes past. It also serves as a habitat for wildlife, including endangered species of fish and the bald eagle.

Now members of the Merrimack River Watershed Council want local people to know that although the river gives life, it now needs some help.

The council, a nonprofit organization based in Lowell, needs volunteers for its Stream Team, which conducts shoreline research and monitors water quality.

"Our volunteers actually go out and test the water," said Tracie Sales, water resources manager for the council.

Volunteers will use cutting-edge equipment to test the river's clarity, levels of acidity, conductivity, saline levels and temperature. And water samples will be taken and sent to the Environmental Protection Agency lab in Chelmsford where they will be tested for bacteria like E. coli.

But the Stream Team will also conduct a shoreline survey of the river's 50 miles of shoreline from the New Hampshire border to the Newburyport estuary, looking for habitats that should be preserved, as well as problems such as the types of trash that could affect water quality, or pollution entering the river.

To make the project more manageable, teams of three or four volunteers will examine each four-mile stretch. They'll record tributaries, pipes, drains, trash piles, public access areas, bank conditions and wildlife habitats. The survey is slated to begin in May.

Shoreline features are catalogued so that if water quality monitoring shows any problem areas, it will be easier for the council to pinpoint the source.

"We're looking for potential sources of pollution," Sales said.

The shoreline survey is made possible through a partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game's Riverways program, which awarded \$10,000 to the watershed council to sponsor the Stream Team.

Training dates for the Stream Team are Monday, April 28, at 2:30 and 6:30 p.m. at the Lowell Public Library, and Tuesday, April 29, at 2:30 and 6:30 p.m. at the Haverhill Public Library.

No experience is necessary to be a volunteer.

"All they need is an interest in the environment and an interest in the river," Sales said.

But if local residents don't have time to spend monitoring and cataloging the river, the Merrimack River Watershed Council, which is a membership organization, accepts donations to fund its programs.

The council has about 50 trained volunteers, but only half were active in 2007, so they are looking for dedicated men and women who understand the importance of clean water and want to keep it clean for those who may not think about it too often.

"I think a lot of people don't really think about where their drinking water comes from," said Sales, adding that drinking water, from its original source to your tap, travels a lengthy path and pollutants can be picked up the entire way.

After a snowy winter and a rainy spring, the biggest problem facing the Merrimack River is combined sewer overflow (CSO), where storm drains get so full of run-off from streets, that the sewer lines, which connect with them, leach sewage into the river.

Other threats to the river comes from more common things like dog owners who don't clean up their animal's droppings, oil that leaks from cars as they drive through the city or salt that was spread to prevent icy roads in the winter. They are all pollutants that get washed away with the rain or melting snow, and eventually end up in the river.

For more information about joining the Merrimack River Stream Team's shoreline survey or helping with water quality monitoring, contact Tracie Sales at 978-275-0120, ext. 13, or tsales@merrimack.org. You can also visit their Web site at www.merrimack.org to find out more about volunteering or donating.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.

Photos



Tracie Sales, left, of the Merrimack River Watershed Council, and volunteer Mike LaBonte of Haverhill, measure and record water quality on the Merrimack River in Haverhill. The Council needs volunteers to help monitor the water quality of the river and to survey the shoreline. Staff photo