



Community Gets First Look at Draft Upper Esopus Creek Management Plan

Cornell University Cooperative Extension staff, New York City Department of Environmental Protection and the Upper Esopus Creek Management Plan Project Advisory Committee revealed their draft Management Plan at a public meeting held last night at the Shandaken Town Hall. This 1,000 page twelve inch thick document represents the culmination of over 3 years of physical and social assessments in the Upper Esopus Creek watershed. According to all partners involved in the project, the plan represents a realistic approach to dealing with stream issues in a mountain setting, and provides a roadmap that streamside landowners, highway managers, municipal officials, various government agencies and many others can use to help sustain and enhance Esopus Creek and its many uses.

The draft document includes 47 separate recommendations addressing flooding and erosion issues, water quality, ecosystem conditions, recreation and community education. It also includes numerous maps, charts, graphs, historic pictures and reference material. According to the draft, The Upper Esopus Creek is a quality resource that is treasured by the local community, and provides significant regional value for recreation and as a water supply source. Any objective assessment would conclude that the overall ecological and physical condition of Esopus Creek is quite good. Highlights of specific findings and recommendations follow.

Flooding & Erosion:

The power and ferocity of the Esopus, especially when it floods is of particular concern to all those who live, recreate and work alongside it. A study of the Esopus Creeks stream banks revealed that 9% were actively eroding, which is not uncharacteristic of a mountain stream like Esopus Creek. Surprisingly, a trends analysis revealed that flooding is no more or less frequent now than in the past 75 years, though with pending climate change many scientists expect there to be an increase in the magnitude of precipitation and consequent flooding. Recommendations for flooding and erosion center on avoiding future development in areas subject to flood damage; encouraging and promoting flood proofing and other measures to reduce damages where existing infrastructure is at risk and; formulation of an early-warning system and flood response plans for a more coordinated and timely response when flooding occurs. Additionally, funding will be provided to hire qualified full-time staff to assist streamside landowners to address flooding and erosion concerns.

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Ecosystem Conditions:

Streamside or riparian vegetative buffers are essential to protecting stream and floodplain ecosystems. Assessments revealed that 22% of Esopus Creek stream banks had a riparian vegetated buffer width of less than 25 feet, which provides little ecosystem value. The plan recommends providing direct technical assistance to landowners to develop riparian buffer management plans, and working with landowners to manage the further spread of Japanese knotweed, an invasive plant that contributes to stream bank erosion. For the aquatic ecosystem, recommendations focus on enhancing cold-water habitat conditions. Further characterizing and protecting spring seeps and wetlands, and exploring operational adjustments of the Shandaken Tunnel discharge to best meet the habitat conditions of trout and other biota, in balance with water supply and recreational uses is recommended.

Water quality:

In general, the water quality of Upper Esopus Creek is good. Turbidity resulting from flood events and diversion of Schoharie Reservoir water through the Shandaken Tunnel continues to be the primary water quality issue. A preliminary sediment budget developed by consultant Dr. Craig Fischenich of the U.S. Army Engineer Research Development Center, found that the stream bed and banks are the principal sources of turbidity in Esopus Creek under flood conditions, and mobilize the most suspended sediment downstream to Ashokan Reservoir. The Shandaken Tunnel has been calculated to have a negligible impact on the total mass of sediment loading to Ashokan Reservoir, but the chronic source of turbidity has been determined to impair the use of the creek for recreation. Since the Shandaken Tunnel turbidity loading is being addressed in a separate study (the DEP Catskill Turbidity Control Study), plan recommendations focus on identifying the locations of chronic fine sediment sources in the Esopus Creek watershed while also encouraging the development of management practices that can reduce the sediment loading from roadside ditches and culverts. The New York City Catskill District Water Supply System, which transfers drinking water from the Schoharie Reservoir through the Shandaken Tunnel, into Esopus Creek and down to Ashokan Reservoir, provides approximately 40% of New York City's average annual water supply demand.

Recreation:

Angling, tubing, kayaking and canoeing are all important recreational uses on Esopus Creek that provide significant benefit to the local economy. The Esopus Creek is one of the prized fly-fishing streams in New York State. The Esopus is also recognized over a wide region as a high-quality Class II/III whitewater recreation stream, and two whitewater slalom races are held on the Esopus annually. Additionally, on average of 15,000 tubers per year visit the self-regulated tubing businesses in Phoenicia to experience the float down Esopus Creek. Recommendations around recreation focus on increasing coordination between DEP, DEC and the recreation community when planning whitewater recreational releases through the Shandaken Tunnel, enhancing creek access and amenities in specified locations, and establishing a code of conduct among anglers, tubers, boaters, and streamside property owners to reduce conflicts that sometimes arise from these multiple uses.

Education:

An understanding of stream stewardship principles is essential for effective stream management. As Christine Baltz, Phoenicia Rotarian and participant in the project advisory committee states, No matter how we may try to regulate and manage our streams and rivers, if we do not work within the parameters of the individual stream dynamics, our efforts could eventually create more damage than we are trying to repair. To this end the plan calls for creating a technical assistance program for streamside landowners to enhance back yard buffers, providing community education on basic stream processes and functions, hosting trainings in stream management for highway department staff and other resource managers, and promoting activities including youth programs and a volunteer monitoring program. The goal of promoting these education efforts according to Baltz is hopefully, this plan will become an information and learning tool used not only by government agencies, but also by private landowners and all stakeholders interested in the Upper Esopus.

Coordination:

The goal of coordination efforts will be to encourage those individuals, landowners, businesses, agencies, and organizations with an interest in the Esopus to focus on developing annual action plans, developing a sustained organizational structure for stream management, and encouraging local adoption of the plan and appropriate policies. According to Harry Jameson, owner of Town tinker Tube rental, Having utilized the Esopus for 27 years to provide over 500,000 people white water recreation experiences, there is no area concerning the creek that I have not dealt with personally. The Esopus Creek Management Planning Committee has been the first attempt ever, to enlist all the stakeholders concerned, and through their input create a complete and comprehensive management plan.

Looking forward Town of Shandaken Supervisor Bob Cross says, The Esopus Creek Management Plan is being created to address concerns of both municipal and public interest. The Plan was created by joint effort from all the involved state, city and local agencies as well as a tremendous amount of public input. This is a living document that will help us in the future with identification, education, and in some cases implementation of areas in need of stabilization or repair. The biggest part of this is helping the public recognize what techniques are available to them and helping to insure that they know where to get support if available.

This draft plan is part of the work funded by a three-year contract between the New York City Department of Environmental Protection and Extension to coordinate the development of a Stream Management Plan for the Upper Esopus Creek (above the Ashokan Reservoir) in the towns of Olive and Shandaken. The process is guided by a Project Advisory Council composed of Town officials, streamside landowners, representatives of the angling and whitewater recreation community, local, county and state agencies and not-for-profits, and others. For more information please contact Jeremy Magliaro, Project Coordinator, at 845-340-3990 or via email: jem87@cornell.edu. The entire plan is downloadable from the Upper Esopus Creek Management Plan website: www.esopuscreek.org.