

The Parsons Creek Watershed Restoration Committee

The Parsons Creek Watershed covers approximately 2.3 square miles in the eastern part of the Town of Rye, NH. High levels of bacteria have been identified in the Parson's Creek watershed, which drains to the popular coastal beaches at Wallis Sands. The impaired water quality affects the health of the creek, and represents a health and safety risk to recreational users of these impacted waters and the beaches, particularly at low tide. The creek and watershed are listed on the NHDES 2010 305(b)/303(d) Surface Water Quality Assessment as impaired for primary contact recreation (bacteria), fish consumption (mercury and PCB's), and shell fishing (bacteria, dioxin,, mercury, and PCB'S).

The issue of water quality in Parsons Creek has been a concern for many years and the town, along with local and state partners have been working to develop and implement strategies to monitor, clean up, and protect the creek and watershed.

The Town of Rye has been awarded two Section 319 Watershed Restoration Grants (319 Grant) through the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (NHDES) Watershed Assistance Section. The goals of this grant funded project are to provide for enhanced stormwater protection measures and provide for improved septic treatment systems adjacent to Parsons' Creek and within the watershed.

The town, working with FB Environmental Associates, Inc., and NHDES, developed the Parsons Creek Watershed-Based Management Plan (WBMP) in 2011. This plan provides specific recommendations for best practices that will improve water quality within the Creek. The Parsons Creek WBMP documents that elevated bacteria levels are primarily due to stormwater runoff from developed areas and low or malfunctioning septic systems. The fact that the Parsons Creek watershed, according to USDA soil surveys, has numerous and extensive soil limitations for septic systems suggests that as outdated or poorly maintained systems malfunction, natural soil and landscape conditions alone cannot be expected to protect surface water quality. To date, under the auspices of the 319 Grant, the town, FB Environmental, and NHDES has:

- Constructed vegetated buffers at two stormwater outfall locations to help filter stormwater pollution before it runs into the creek.
- Set up a bacteria monitoring program to help identify bacteria "hotspots" and trace potential sources.
- Developed a septic system database for all homes in the watershed.
- Gone door-to-door to interview homeowners and gather data on septic systems in an effort to identify failed or impaired systems.
- Conducted several community outreach sessions in an effort to educate homeowners and residents about the watershed, the level of impairment and what is being done to improve it.
- Developed a town web page.
- Posted warning signs at the Parsons Creek Outlet at Wallis Sands Beach that tidal pools may contain unacceptable levels of bacteria.
- Researched and developed a "pump-out" ordinance for homes within the watershed requiring homeowners to pump out their septic systems every three years depending on the system load and type of system.

The Board of Selectmen feel that this is a community wide problem and would like to provide residents an opportunity to help direct the effort to begin implementing solutions to cleaning up the watershed. The Board of Selectmen have established a Parsons Creek Watershed Restoration Committee that shall consist of at least three and not more than five members, all residents of Rye. Members shall be appointed by the Board of Selectmen for an initial term ending on March 31, 2017. Staff members may be appointed as non-voting members of the committee. It is the Selectmen's intent to sunset this committee after completion of its charge, unless the selectmen vote to continue the committee.

Charge

- Review information on the watershed developed to date. Determine a limited number of bacteria "hot-spot" areas on which to focus the Committee's efforts.
- Work with the town staff to develop and implement a plan to gather additional data in focused bacteria "hot spot" areas in the watershed to better understand the source of bacterial contamination from individual on-site septic systems in these areas.
- Based on the information available, work with the Town staff to prepare an implementation plan to lead to enforcement actions by the Town to decrease water quality impacts from on-site septic systems that can be shown to impact surface water quality in the bacteria "hot spot" areas.
- Solicit the help and input of the town's partners and consultants in addressing the above three charges.
- Review the on-going activities of the town staff and its partners and consultants under the 319 Grant.
- Report back to the Board of Selectmen on the above charges and the committee's recommendations for appropriate next steps for the town to take, no later than December 1, 2016.

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