



Photos courtesy of the South River Federation

# The South River Federation

## Building business through restoration

By Kirk Mantay

**M**aryland's Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Trust Fund works to accelerate Bay restoration by focusing limited financial resources on the most effective non-point source pollution control projects. Dollars for the Trust Fund are generated through Maryland's motor fuel and rental car taxes.

To date, through the Trust Fund, the State has invested roughly \$6 million in improving water quality in the South River — \$3.3 million of which has gone directly to reducing non-point source pollution in the Church Creek watershed. Such projects are wise investments for Maryland's taxpayers, creating local jobs through State funding while improving our waterways. But how did this marriage get started and what do private sector businesses have to say about it?

### The re-awakening

When the DNR Lower Western Shore Tributary Strategy Team was christened in 1995, one of its major goals was to rouse the dormant South River Federation — an organization dating back to the 1950s. The Department and other funders helped the Federation re-establish itself in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Funding, training and partnerships with various agency teams grew thick through the mid-2000s to complete small-scale projects and implement science-based monitoring. In 2011, staffed with six full-time employees, the Federation became the first Chesapeake Bay non-profit organization whose water quality data is accepted by State and federal agencies. What's at the center of all of this? Strategic partnerships and funding pursued by the Department.

In 2012, the relationship grew deeper when DNR awarded the Federation significant funding from the Trust Fund and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for work in the various

watersheds of the South River, starting with the highly impaired Church and Broad Creeks. Both of these creeks drain portions of the southwest Annapolis area and are the most degraded.



Top: Post-restoration walk through; Above: South River, pre-construction

# Church Creek Chronicled

About 10 years ago, Jerry Blackwell was in the market for a good piece of land near the Annapolis city line. As he peered over the hillside at a potential property, he saw thousands of tires, discarded appliances and tons of trash laid across the entire floodplain — the headwaters of Church Creek on the South River.

"You know," he told the seller, "the State doesn't like dumps in the woods like this."

The seller flipped his palms up and responded, "Well, what's done is done. Nobody cares about this creek anyway."

### Past predicaments

Blackwell bought that property and spent an entire decade using tractors to pull out cars, trailers, 55-gallon drums, trash bags and tires, oh the tires — all dumped illegally. Out it came, one tractor bucket at a time.

Meanwhile, in a spring storm in 2003, members of the (then) all-volunteer South River Federation followed a sediment plume up to the site from the tidal creek. With more than 50 percent pavement draining to the headwaters, it became obvious — the creek banks were tearing away, sending harmful sediment downstream.

With this call to action, the Federation did a search of landowners based on a tax mapping of the area. They located Blackwell and offered to help him with his efforts to clean up the creek.

In 2007, the now fully staffed Federation devised a proactive plan to identify rain gardens, buffer plantings, stream restoration projects and potential living shorelines — nearly 50 projects in all — to help bring Church Creek (nearly 60 percent paved at this point) back from the brink.

Small projects were being completed with small grants and membership dollars — but impossible funding gaps remained. In 2012, that changed: the Federation entered into partnerships on several projects with Maryland's Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Trust Fund.

### Present progress

Despite some delays, the efforts of a total of 12 partners paid off when construction broke ground at the Church Creek dump site in February 2014 and concluded in July. More than a decade after Blackwell hauled the first tractor load of trash out of the valley, a coastal plain stream with a healthy wetland floodplain has been established.

The results from this project have been inspiring. The beaver, long gone from this eroding wetland, returned within weeks. Snakes and turtles? Within a month. In September, 300 migrating doves found the site on their way to Mexico, and in October, dozens of New York wood ducks stopped on their way to South Carolina. To wildlife, State habitat dollars matter.

Blackwell still shakes his head that it took so long to complete the work. "Isn't it obvious that this was the right thing to do?"

The effort is unique in that it was a partnership between volunteers, State agencies, engineers, biologists and landowners working together to recover the creek, which afforded a holistic look at the stream...and ultimately, success.

### Future outlook

By 2016, very little eroding creek bed will remain in the Church Creek drainage thanks to additional grants from the Trust Fund, the Chesapeake Bay Trust, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Maryland Department of the Environment and others.

A \$200,000, 10-year monitoring effort funded by private donors is underway to predict how successful the efforts will be to Church Creek and the South River. This data, and the strategic plan first drawn up by the Federation nearly 10 years ago, will serve as important examples of what works — and perhaps what doesn't — when it comes to creek-centric watershed restoration.

The returning wildlife don't much care for data, though — warblers eating cedar cones, beavers gnawing on alder stems, and kingfishers chasing fish that have stayed out of the creek for 30 years or more. They are both witness to, and evidence of, the very beginning of the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Trust Fund's legacy on Maryland rivers. ■



Church Creek wildlife



## Private sector profits

The scale and consistency of Trust Fund grants have been instrumental in galvanizing community and regulatory support, as well as additional endowments from private and public donors to get the work off the ground. The funding has also led to a sustained local market for contractors and consultants — now feverishly hiring engineers, surveyors and skilled laborers for local projects.

Dennis Meckley, chief of surveys at Carroll Land Services, Inc. says, “Survey opportunities in the commercial and residential sector have diminished in our area since 2008 due to economic factors. I have been fortunate to connect with the South River Federation and provide them with topographic and construction stakeout survey services for stream restoration.”

“This work,” he explains, “has been helpful in bridging the gap between other assignments, enabling me to provide continued employment for several surveyors. The results of our assessments and the consequent construction provide the residents of the immediate area and the broader Chesapeake Bay watershed with improved water quality. This benefits all of us.”

Joe Berg, vice president of Baltimore-based environmental consultant Biohabitats, Inc., notes that their firm, one of many in



Completed restoration



Construction phase

Maryland, has hired six water resource engineers in the past year alone. He says, “Biohabitats, like the rest of the Maryland engineering consulting community, is working hard to build personnel capacity to help our clients meet their goals.”

Those in the private sector have been excited to see the large scope and breadth of work being completed by small organizations with low overhead — and donations often follow. Dollars from the Trust Fund have been well-matched with private and corporate monies. The work’s value has expanded to Maryland taxpayers and has allowed groups like the

South River Federation to focus on sub-watershed scale work in Church Creek.

## Visible progress

Once noted by government agencies as a *critically bleeding artery* of the South River, Church Creek recovery efforts began in 2009 and will conclude in 2016 thanks to consistent partners like DNR, the Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays Trust Fund, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Chesapeake Bay Trust. Nearly 50 non-point source pollution control projects will be completed, most in backyards and in community open spaces.

The Broad Creek initiative is in its wake; restoration efforts began this year and will conclude in 2018. Work for 2017-2022 is planned for the next tier of impairment, which includes Beards Creek and Crab Creek.

Mike Hollins, president of Sylva Natives Nursery, which grows native plants for both conservation projects and private landscaping, sees the DNR-supported work underway throughout Maryland and says, “These projects help create jobs and develop an industry of ecological stewardship in the often challenging market of landscaping.”

Hollins has been able to hire and retain staff at his large-scale commercial operations as a result.

More than just dots on a map, hundreds of similar projects across the Bay watershed prove to be wise investments for Maryland taxpayers. They exemplify how State funding, strategic partnerships and new approaches enhance our waterways and create local economies. ■

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