

DEC chief sees stream restoration progress

By CHRIS MORRIS - Staff Writer (cmorris@adirondackdailyenterprise.com)
Adirondack Daily Enterprise

February 3, 2012

KEENE VALLEY - River and stream rehabilitation is under way here, but officials say a lot of work still remains to be done. Lawmakers, local politicians and state officials joined state Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens Thursday afternoon to inspect work done last year to rebuild a portion of Johns Brook that was damaged by Tropical Storm Irene on Aug. 28.

Local works crews did emergency repairs immediately following Irene, but environmental specialists said additional work was needed to restore fish and wildlife habitats and protect against future flooding. The rebuilt banks and beds of the streams were uniformly shaped and looked like urban drainage ditches, some said.

Bill Schoch, a fisheries biologist with DEC, said excavators were used after the storm to protect critical transportation infrastructure and protect property owners downstream from Johns Brook, which feeds into the East Branch of the AuSable River. "Since then, we've begun to look at longer-term restoration options," Schoch said. "And there are some great options that can help us better protect the infrastructure, help the channel pass future flood flows with less problems and give us fish habitat. We can have it all, so to speak."

Schoch explained that state Department of Transportation crews, under the direction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, were able to install natural structures that redirect the energy of Johns Brook away from bridges and riverbanks. He said the work that was done also uses the stream's energy to keep sediment from building up in less than desirable places.



Bill Schoch, DEC Fisheries describing restoration rock weir placement on Johns Brook, Keene Valley. Photo by Dan Plumley



Installed rock weir on Johns Brook. Photo by Dan Plumley



Region 5 Director Bob Stegemann (far right) & Supervisor Keene Bill Ferebee (far left). Photo by Dan Plumley



DEC Commissioner Joe Martens with Adirondack Wild's Dan Plumley

"So we have a rock weir across the channel," Schoch said. "It's U-shaped, with the open part of the U facing downstream. And as the rock comes up on the bank, the elevation of the rock increases. What this does is it redirects the stream's erosive energy to the middle of the stream."

As the water level rises, Schoch said, it flows over the sides of the weir and turns toward the middle of the channel - away from riverbanks and bridge abutments.

But this work is just a small portion of what needs to be done. Keene Valley resident Henrietta Jordan told Martens she's still concerned about problems upstream.

"Because, as you know, the banks were heavily armored, and the channels, as best as I can tell, and I'm not a stream technician, it appears to have been cut off from its historic flood plain," she said. "And I'm concerned, as a layperson, that the velocity of the water now channelized is going to be sort of tough on this new structure that you've put into place."

Schoch said no specific plans are in place to fix upstream problems yet. But he said he hopes those will be addressed as soon as the necessary funding and resources are in place.

Martens said he's heard complaints that there is too little state funding for river mitigation. He said more resources are being put into addressing these problems.

"(There) was kind of an unprecedented act of the Legislature in December to provide resources to local communities for addressing just these types of problems," Martens said. "Twenty-one million dollars went to ESD (Empire State Development) nine million dollars to counties to do more of this work."

Dan Plumley, of the environmental group Adirondack Wild, pointed out that he was among those that were concerned with the emergency work done following Irene.

Plumley said he and others wanted a "command level, integrated task force" consisting of state and federal officials that would work with town supervisors and stakeholders. He said he felt that people in the towns of Keene and Jay have been left out in the cold.

"They've not been informed, they've not been invited to understand what's happening in their rivers, and the lesson learned is that they care," Plumley said. "They want to know about the future management of these important ecosystems."

But Plumley's claim was not entirely true. In November, the town of Jay hosted an informational session about Irene and its impact on the AuSable River system - a meeting that attracted more than 100 local residents, business owners and environmentalists, as well as local, state and federal officials.

Martens also denied that government left local stakeholders out of the process.

"Nobody said government was perfect," he said. "When you started the conversation about the groups and the locals asking for things, from where I sit, you got it. You got more attention from more levels of state government than I've ever witnessed before."

Following the inspection, Keene town Supervisor Bill Ferebee told the Enterprise that streams around his community, like Gulf Brook, are still a mess. He said he appreciates the work that's been done, but he won't feel comfortable until more resources start flowing in.

"It's great to see the commissioner here, and we've definitely had the governor involved," Ferebee said. "Eventually it will get there; it's just not as quickly as we'd like to see it happen."