

courant.com/community/news/mr/hc-eightmile0509.artmay09,0,3214971.story

# Courant.com

## Bush Signs Bill That Will Protect Eightmile River

By DAVID FUNKHOUSER

Courant Staff Writer

May 9, 2008

LYME —

Nathan Frohling stood next to the Eightmile River near the East Haddam-Lyme border and pointed to a shrubby clearing in the woods. "This was going to be a six-lot subdivision," he said.

Frohling, who works for The Nature Conservancy, was overdue at his office, but on this warm spring day the woods were calling, and he had to fight the urge to keep walking. He was showing off what he and many others have worked for a dozen years to protect.

Shaded by gossamer spring foliage, the clear waters of the Eightmile, a foot deep and 25 feet wide, bubbled through the woods; birds chattered among the trees. For a moment, the forest felt still and whole, untouched by roads, houses, industry. Then the faint whine of a truck passing on Route 156 signaled that this was indeed Connecticut, and that "civilization" was not far off.

As of Thursday, this relatively untouched setting has a better chance of surviving: President Bush signed into law a natural resources act that includes a measure designating the Eightmile and its tributaries "wild and scenic." That makes it only the second entire watershed in the nation to earn this highest form of federal protection.

In an increasingly paved-over state, where development chews at the edges of innumerable green spaces, the 40,000-acre watershed of the Eightmile River is exceptional: It is 80 percent forest, largely unbroken by development, and home to a just few hamlets, farms and homes; 87 people per square mile live here, far below the state average of 700.

More than 150 miles of rivers and streams, most clean enough to be classified as potential drinking water, vein the hilly, rocky land. The area is home to 155 rare species of animals and plants, from the bald eagle to the frosted elfin butterfly and the winged monkey-flower.

"The holy grail for the conservancy and the wild and scenic study is the watershed," said Frohling. "It's really unusual to find a riverine ecosystem that is so intact throughout its range."

The law Bush signed included the first bill introduced to Congress by freshman U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, following an earlier version by his predecessor, Rob Simmons.

"This is a terrific moment for the Eightmile River watershed and the many advocates who for 10 years have fought for its preservation," Courtney said.

The effort involved land trusts, state and local officials and volunteers from East Haddam, Lyme and Salem. Working with The Nature Conservancy, the group has garnered millions of dollars to buy land outright or ensure conservation and farming easements for thousands of acres.

**COMCAST MEANS BUSINESS.**

Get Comcast Business Class  
Voice, Internet and TV for just \$99 a month.

[CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE](#)

**Comcast**  
Business Class  
Turn Your Office On™

About a third of the watershed is protected, including several hundred acres of Nature Conservancy land, state forest and Devil's Hopyard State Park, where the Eightmile roars down 50-foot Chapman Falls.

The Eightmile is one of two "wild and scenic" rivers in Connecticut: The 14 miles of the Upper Farmington River between Colebrook and Canton earned the designation in 1994. An effort is underway to win the same designation for the lower Farmington.

The 40-year-old Wild and Scenic Rivers program has protected more than 11,000 miles of 165 free-flowing rivers nationwide.

The program effectively bars dams, irrigation or other large water projects that require federal funding or approval. The towns will receive annual funding from the National Park Service to help manage the watershed. And the area will have greater clout when applying for grants.

Perhaps most important, the effort brought together landowners, land use boards and conservation groups from all three towns and got them to agree on a plan to keep the watershed pristine. None of the land is federally owned; its fate lies in the hands of the three towns and the individual landowners, Frohling said.

The watershed plan recommends that the towns bar development within 100 feet of the larger rivers and streams and within 50 feet along smaller streams.

There could be exceptions, but Frohling said the group will work with landowners to encourage land use that minimizes impact on the watershed.

Salem and East Haddam already have approved the corridors, and a vote is pending in Lyme, Frohling said.

The plan also recommends that the towns focus on protecting important blocks of habitat and work to curb pollution from storm-water runoff by limiting how much land can be turned into impervious surfaces such as roads, parking lots and buildings.

On a recent tour of the watershed, Frohling and Anthony Irving, a natural resources consultant from Lyme who also worked on the project, stopped to admire the postcard view at one of the two dams in the watershed, at Moulson's Pond. Downstream sits the original Red Mill, now a private residence.

The watershed's residents include bobcats, mink, fishers, otters and weasels, plus a number of birds, salamanders, frogs, turtles and snakes. Brook trout, American alewife and Atlantic salmon swim the river.

"Everything you would expect for this part of the country to be on the river, you would find here," said Irving, as a pair of Baltimore orioles jumped from tree to tree and whistled an insistent tune.

The area has one of the most concentrated populations of rare plant and animal species in New England, many of them threatened or endangered. The Cerulean warbler is the watershed's "poster child": a tiny blue bird that, like many creatures, survives best in large expanses of unbroken forest.

The rarest of all is Eaton's beggar's-tick, an annual herb that grows along tidal river shores and is considered a globally threatened species.

Contact David Funkhouser at [dfunkhouser@courant.com](mailto:dfunkhouser@courant.com).

Copyright © 2008, [The Hartford Courant](#)