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Eightmile River Finally 'Wild & Scenic'

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Published on 5/9/2008 in [Home](#) » [Main Photo](#)

SURELY THE EIGHTMILE RIVER and its watershed are just as wild and scenic today as they were before Thursday morning.

But the stroke of President Bush's pen Thursday made all the difference in the meaning those words will carry in the language that governs federal dollars and actions.

The president signed into law a bill officially designating the river and its 62-square-mile watershed, which spreads into wet meadows, woodlands and fields in East Haddam, Lyme and Salem, as part of the National Park Service's Wild & Scenic Rivers program.

"With the president's signature making the Eightmile a wild and scenic river, we have confirmation that this is indeed a remarkable place that we live," said Sue Merrow, former East Haddam first selectwoman and one of the signers of a pact 10 years ago among the three towns agreeing to work to protect the Eightmile.

The river and its watershed, prized for its superior water quality, sparse development and the hundreds of rural and forested acres that dominate its landscape, begins in two forks in the northern parts of East Haddam and Salem that meet and flow southwest to empty into the Connecticut River at Hamburg Cove in Lyme.

"Finally, we can say this is a wild and scenic river," said Anthony Irving, chairman of the Eightmile River Wild & Scenic Coordinating Committee.

Like the meandering river itself, the path to winning the designation was anything but a straight, short trajectory from concept to culmination. It took years of studies, town meetings and local approvals, then the circuitous journey of Eightmile River bills through Congress before approval was finally won this spring and the measure went to Bush.

"This is a tremendous victory for everyone who has fought so hard to ensure the Eightmile River's pristine beauty will remain unspoiled," said Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn. "The Eightmile River is one of nature's great works of art."

The state's entire congressional delegation supported the bill. The most recent House version of the Eightmile bill was the first one introduced by Democratic U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney when he took over the 2nd District seat two years ago. He congratulated the local group that worked for more than a decade to win the designation.

Courtney said he plans to officially mark the occasion on Tuesday, when he plans to join schoolchildren from Lyme on a visit to a section of the Eightmile to watch the release of salmon from a state fish hatchery. He plans to publicly acknowledge the achievement during the visit, though precise details are still being worked out, he said.

"We'll come up with some way to celebrate it," he said. "Anthony (Irving) and the whole crew that worked on this have been nothing if not persistent."

Irving's involvement began 14 years ago, when he agreed to be part of a group working with scientists from the Nature Conservancy and the University of Connecticut who wanted to understand what it would mean to protect an entire watershed, and chose the Eightmile for their project. Irving at the time was on the Inland Wetlands Commission in Lyme. Once the scientists' study was done, he and others in the three towns became aware as never before that they had a rare treasure in their midst that needed to be protected before overdevelopment rendered it ordinary or worse.

"When the study wrapped up in 2000," Irving recalled, "we asked, 'What do we do now?'"

The answer came from Nature Conservancy's Nathan Frohling, who had worked on projects for the state's only other Wild & Scenic River, the Farmington. He suggested pursuing the same status for the Eightmile, but not just for the river itself or a section of it, as is the case with the Farmington and most of the 169 other Wild & Scenic Rivers nationwide, but for the Eightmile and its entire watershed.

"We had no idea what we were getting into. No one had ever even heard anything about wild and scenic designation," Irving said.

Frohling, vice chairman of the Eightmile committee, said that by winning the designation for the entire watershed instead of just the river itself or a section of it, "it allows us to protect the entire ecosystem, the networks of streams and land" that make the Eightmile what it is.

Frohling said the designation "is not just about getting a plaque on the wall," but brings with it both added resources and responsibilities. He listed four ways Wild & Scenic status will affect the watershed:

! No federal permits can be issued or federal money spent on any project in the watershed that would compromise it. That would include projects such as dam construction and Army Corps of Engineers fill permits.

! About \$150,000 in National Park Service funding will be provided annually for a staff and budget for the Eightmile. The staff person would work with volunteers and oversee projects with the three towns. One such project might be to help the towns revise land-use laws governing development near the river. The budget could also be used for studies of the watershed's aquatic life, for example.

! The commitments made by the three towns will be "solidified," according to Frohling. "Most of the protections will be at the local level," he said.

! The designation will give the watershed greater status in applying for grants and other assistance in future projects. "This gives us leverage, clout," said Frohling.

Over the next year, however, funding may be a problem. Irving said the Eightmile River committee has only been able to maintain its office and current staff person, project manager Damon Hearne, thanks to \$35,000 in funding from the three towns as it awaits federal dollars. The bill was signed too late for the Eightmile to be included in the fiscal 2008-09 budget requests, but it would be included the federal budget for following year.

Courtney said he will work to find funds for the coming fiscal year, but added that it may be hard to find even a few dollars because Bush has threatened to veto any domestic-spending package that includes any increase.

Hearne said projects that are priorities once the Eightmile has a steady source of funding include water-quality monitoring, working with the towns to put management plans for the river into action, and helping the towns secure grants to better manage storm water flowing into the river.

Others include posting signs at public access areas about the Wild & Scenic designation and publicizing the many parks and land-trust properties in the watershed where people can enjoy the river.

"We'd like people to think of the Eightmile as a refuge," Irving said.

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