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Redden State Forest project part of Chesapeake Bay restoration

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Source: Submitted

Delaware has more than 2,000 miles of tax ditches, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The long-term battle to restore the Chesapeake Bay is quietly being waged close at hand - on the Deep Creek Tract of Redden State Forest in Georgetown, near the intersection of Rum Bridge Road and Route 404/18. That's where Guy Cooper and Mike Green of the Delaware Forest Service are using heavy equipment to carefully move soft, sandy soil along the placid, sun-dappled waters of the nearby tax ditch.

The methodical work is part of a proven strategy to lower the bank level in 17 key locations as a way to connect the artificial waterway to its natural floodplain. The new configuration will allow water from excessive rainfall events to overspill the banks and flow into nearby woodlands, letting the forest serve as a natural filter by absorbing excess sediment, nutrients and pollutants.

The project is one thread in the wider fabric of the Nanticoke Watershed Restoration Plan - a cooperative strategy to improve the health of the Nanticoke Watershed, a key contributor to water quality in the Chesapeake Bay. The effort has involved local tax ditch officials, nonprofit groups such as the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance, state agencies such as Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control and the Delaware Forest Service, and federal partners such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Deep Creek covers 63 square miles and comprises one of 15 sub-watersheds that constitute the Chesapeake Bay Basin. These areas contain headwater forests for the Nanticoke River that also serve as important wildlife habitats for an abundance of unique plants and animals. The cost - about \$1,000 per cut-out depending on the amount of soil and material to be moved - is funded by a five-year grant from the EPA administered by DNREC that targets non-point source pollution.

For private landowners, federal agencies like the NRCS offer financial and technical assistance programs such as its Wetlands Reserve Program to incentivize private landowners to implement water quality projects such as planting trees along riparian areas. However, public lands such as those at Redden State Forest also offer unique opportunities for water quality restoration, according to Brian Jennings, fish and wildlife biologist at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Chesapeake Bay Field Office.

According to Erich Burkentine, Delaware Forest Service regional forester in Sussex County, the effort is showing signs of success: "It's definitely working the way it is supposed to. Now that we've had a bit more rainfall this year than recent years, we can see how the water has been diverted into the woodlands in places where the reconnects have been installed."

In addition to improved water quality, reconnecting the channels can help reduce flooding downstream and also provide habitat for key species that thrive in forest wetland ecosystems.

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Delaware Forest Service worker Guy Cooper uses an excavator to carefully move soil along a tax ditch on the Deep Creek Tract of Redden State Forest. (Source: Submitted)



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sounds like a plan.

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