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Wetland could get 'prime' classification

By Alison Watts

[Newfields Conservation Commission chairwoman](#)

NEWFIELDS -- If you go to the end of Halls Mill Road and hike into the newly protected Piscassic Greenway, past a beaver dam and through a pine grove, you will find yourself in a sea of cattails bisected by a small stream.

This wetland is named "Number 5" and is one of several that the Newfields Conservation Commission wants to designate as prime wetlands. But to finalize that designation, the town must vote its approval in March 2008.

Because it will be subject to a town vote, commission members know that the wetland's public image becomes important.

"You should give wetlands names," said Mark West, of West Environmental Inc. "People identify with names and protect resources that they can identify with."

West was hired by the Newfields Conservation Commission to evaluate the town's wetlands and determine which areas should be designated as prime wetlands.

Even though wetlands in New Hampshire are protected by NH RSA-482-A and the Federal Clean Water Act, communities may increase protection for wetlands if "their size, unspoiled character, fragile condition or other relevant factors make them of substantial significance." These wetlands are designated as prime wetlands and are protected against activities that would result in significant net loss of prime wetland values.

"Newfields has a lot of high-quality wetlands," West says. "For a town located in the center of Seacoast to have so much unfragmented land is unusual."

Many of the highly ranked wetlands in Newfields are also identified as core conservation focus areas in the newly released land conservation plan for New Hampshire's coastal watersheds, created by The Nature Conservancy.

With a grant from the New Hampshire Estuaries Project, the Newfields Conservation Commission hired West Environmental to start the wetlands evaluations in the spring of 2006. Each wetland in the town over two acres was identified and evaluated using a series of criteria, including size, habitat value, vegetation and hydrology. Forty-five wetlands were evaluated, ranging from large tidal marshes along the Squamscott River and inland freshwater marshes to smaller wetlands with vernal pool habitat.

The wetlands were then ranked, with the highest value wetlands receiving the highest scores. Wetland Number 5 received the fifth-highest ranking, based largely on its size and

its location along a branch of the Piscassic River. The Conservation Commission reviewed the wetland scores, and recommended that 22 of the highest-ranked wetlands receive the prime designation.

The next step is to create a map showing the wetlands and all of the town tax parcels. This map will be available for town residents and the Planning Board to review, and in 2008 the town will vote on whether to designate the selected wetlands as "prime."

Many other Seacoast communities are also choosing to add this extra level of protection to wetlands that have exceptional value. Exeter, Newington and Newmarket have designated prime wetlands, and several more communities, including Portsmouth, Fremont, Brentwood, Hampton and Hampton Falls, have commissioned prime wetland evaluations.

But the problem of Wetland Number 5's name still exists. Perhaps the commission should hold a townwide naming contest for the 22 wetlands under consideration. After all, it is hard not to protect a wetland that you know on a first-name basis.

Eye on our Estuaries is an educational column by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project about coastal watershed issues. The NHEP is a collaborative program involving governmental agencies, universities, nonprofit organizations, businesses and the public to protect, enhance and monitor the environmental quality of the state's coastal bays and rivers. NHEP is funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. For details, visit www.nhep.unh.edu.

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