

CONCLUSIONS

The Pine Creek Valley Watershed Association is grateful to Pennsylvania's Growing Greener Grant program, and the Department of Environmental Protection, for the opportunity to further its efforts to protect the Pine Creek Watershed. It has been both enlightening and rewarding for us to collect and analyze data, conduct ecological studies, create GIS maps and compile a photographic survey that, together, illustrate the exceptional nature of this watershed. It has validated our mission and strengthened our commitment to do all that we can to enter a new proactive phase of resource protection.

We have visited many landowners and have attended numerous public meetings during the course of this project. Overall, we have witnessed a sincere interest in preserving the region's quality of life, especially its excellent water resources, although few people have expressed concern that these resources are in any way threatened. We have also encountered some suspicious individuals who oppose any change in the status quo and fear that upgrading stream classifications or promoting watershed protection could impact private property rights or increase taxes. These diverse attitudes point up the real need for open and respectful informal communications and inclusiveness in our grassroots education activities.

The Pine Creek Watershed is surrounded by rapidly growing areas, and there are few local limitations to encroaching sprawl. Our findings suggest that without a concerted protection effort, gradually increasing residential development will impact sensitive natural areas, reduce the extent of contiguous forest cover, and lower water quality rankings. This can be predicted based upon our own stream assessment, which indicated a lessening of water quality as one proceeds downstream from forested headwaters into areas of greater human activity. The County has designated the Pine Creek Watershed an environmentally sensitive area for rural conservation, and the County's Policy Recommendations for 2020 can provide guidelines to the local townships as they enter joint planning discussions. The Environmental Protection Overlay District of Rockland Township is an excellent model to protect waterways, slopes and wetlands.

The Pine Creek Valley Watershed Association believes voluntary land preservation is the method of choice to protect most of the watershed's wooded areas. The Conservation Easement is a flexible tool that can be designed to meet a landowner's conservation goals. The donation of easements can yield significant tax benefits. As a qualified Land Trust, the Association can accept donated easements or can purchase easements in special cases. The Association plans to set up a Land Protection Fund to assist with limited purchase of easements in the case of "most threatened" properties. Criteria will be established for those properties with critical habitat that may be eligible for matching funds under the PA DCNR Community Conservation Partnerships Program.

The exceptional quality of our water is dependent upon the land surrounding it, especially the ridges and slopes of contiguous forest cover that support numerous springs, seeps, first-order streams and a dynamic ecological system that offers benefits and pleasures to its human inhabitants who are also a part of nature. Protecting this area can be our legacy to future generations. It will be a gift of immeasurable value.