

Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee

Washington Lempster Marlow Gilsum Sullivan Surry Keene Swanzey Winchester Hinsdale
Annual Report: 2019

The volunteer board of the Ashuelot River Local Advisory Committee met monthly in 2019 continuing to conscientiously review permits impacting the river, and monitor projects within the quarter mile river corridor.

Permits: The Committee reviewed permits for above and belowground storage tanks in Winchester, shoreland impacts in Washington and bank stabilization and habitat improvement of farmland in Hinsdale. Two shoreland infractions involving illegal tree cutting in Keene were reported to NHDES, as was a permit violation in Lempster where the Town constructed a retaining wall on the riverbank. Along Beaver Brook in Keene, Citgo gas station's petroleum leak and bank erosion were also concerns that were addressed. In Washington, dam reconstruction and spillway repairs at the outlet of Ashuelot Pond were reviewed and supported. Members meticulously reviewed plans for a rebuild of Eaton Road in Swanzey and made recommendations on culverts and erosion control. Dillant-Hopkins Airport runway expansion in Swanzey merited a close look as habitat loss and poor water quality are likely outcomes of this work, along with a substantial Aquatic Resource Mitigation fund payment by the airport. Also ARLAC will continue to follow the progress of FAA mandated wildlife fencing proposed to exclude animals from the runways. ARLAC advocated to NHDOT for the State's retention of land near the Ashuelot Covered Bridge for rail trail parking, and supported the proposed Swanzey Town Park improvements by the Thompson Covered Bridge. We reviewed Eversource's plans for utility pole replacements in Keene crossing wetlands near the river.

Projects: Dams along the Ashuelot River merited discussion during several meetings. Members attended a meeting on the future of the West Street Dam in Keene with five options outlined by the presenters from the Rhode Island School of Design. We commented on the two Winchester dams owned by Ashuelot Hydro Inc. who seeks Low Impact Hydro Institute certification enabling them more favorable rates on electricity generated. Fiske Mill Dam in Hinsdale is scheduled to begin license renewal in 2020 but has yet to respond to FERC regarding relicensing. The capability of the fish lift at this site is questionable and updated studies of fish populations in this area are needed. ARLAC's concerns are for adequate up and downstream fish passage for species such as shad and eels, as well as water quality and increased recreational opportunities for the public. The hydro-dam in Marlow has completed a study of dwarf wedgemussels, one step toward re-licensing.

Culverts were of concern at two sites in Gilsum, one in a gravel pit adjacent to the river, the other a box culvert replaced by NHDOT without a permit or adequate erosion protection. ARLAC supported the successful efforts in Surry to rehabilitate a poorly performing culvert on Thompson Brook. ARLAC members monitored Liberty Utilities successful installation of a pipeline beneath the riverbed in Keene.

Two Keene State College students had assisted ARLAC with an assessment of the river corridor updating the 2006 report, meeting with ARLAC and local representatives from the corridor towns to complete visual inspections.

River cleanup was September 28 as part of the annual Connecticut River Conservancy's Source to the Sea river cleanup. 73 volunteers removed three tons of trash from the Ashuelot River in Swanzey and Beaver Brook in Keene.

Twenty one volunteers provided over 150 hours to conduct monthly water quality monitoring from May-September. Towns along the river corridor contributed funds to support E.coli sampling, and ARLAC was able to procure three new dissolved oxygen/conductivity meters. The Ashuelot continues to maintain its designation as Class B water for dissolved oxygen, specific conductance, chloride and turbidity. Bacteria counts remained within standards for most of the summer but continued to be high after a heavy rainfall likely due to stormwater runoff. Specific conductance measures ions in the water and while within standards, does show evidence of human impact with an increase from Keene and downstream. Phosphorus levels continue to be reduced. Acidity continues as an ongoing concern with low pH in the headwaters, slowly becoming less acidic as the river flows through Keene and downstream.

Eloise Clark, Clerk
Barbara Skuly, Chair