



# The Blackstone River Coalition

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## **4/2/19... Water Quality Summit Report Shows Blackstone River Improving**

The new Blackstone Heritage Corridor Visitor Center in Worcester was the perfect venue last Saturday, March 30<sup>th</sup>, for reporting that the river is showing signs of improvement.

At its annual water quality monitoring summit and volunteer appreciation breakfast, the Blackstone River Coalition (BRC) released its 2018 Report Card to a standing-room-only audience. The event was attended by program volunteers from MA and RI, municipal planners, environmental consultants, watershed group representatives, and community leaders.

Worcester City Manager Ed Augustus welcomed the audience and commended the volunteers for their ongoing commitment to the watershed. He singled out the connection between the efforts of the headwater monitors with those of the City's new Blue Space initiative. The two programs dovetail nicely in that the BRC program monitors the rivers and streams, and the City monitors the lakes and ponds that receive those waters.

Donna Williams, BRC Water Quality Program Manager, acknowledged the volunteers' work as the scientific backbone of the Blackstone River Coalition's advocacy efforts that are the Campaign for a Fishable/Swimmable Blackstone River. She also recognized the broad partnership of agencies, elected officials, and local groups that made the new visitor center a reality after decades of planning.

The 2018 Report Card was presented by Susan Thomas, who serves as the Coordinator for the volunteer monitoring program. She began by commending the over 100 volunteers that allowed the program to achieve 97% coverage of last year's 600 water quality sampling events.

Ms. Thomas explained how wet weather affected results from the sampling days in August-November in 2018. Snowmelt and rain create storm water runoff, which is when pollution is carried over land by water to nearby streams, rivers, and lakes. Storm water runoff is the leading cause of water pollution across the country. This is especially true for nutrients like phosphates and nitrates that can reduce water quality when too much is washed into waterways from lawns, roadways, farm fields, and sewage leaks.

Positive news from the 2018 Report Card:

- Nutrient levels in headwater tributaries around Worcester were graded good or fair, and some sites are showing improvement over the past two years.
- 19 of 20 tributaries in the watershed's midreach section (Upton to Blackstone) received excellent or good grades for nutrients.
- These midreach sites include several along the Mumford and West Rivers, Centerville Brook in Douglas, Cook Allen Brook in Sutton, Warren Brook in Upton, and Bacon Brook in Uxbridge.
- Nutrient levels in the Blackstone River itself (the "mainstem") improved at seven of nine sampling locations from 2017 – 2018 including upstream of the Blackstone Gorge.
- Four sites on the Blackstone River received excellent or good grades for nutrients including in Blackstone near Fox Brook.
- These midreach and mainstem nutrient grades show a dramatic improvement from past years.
- All but one Rhode Island tributary to the Blackstone River improved or stayed the same for nutrients compared to last year.

Adam Kautza, fisheries biologist with MA Fish and Wildlife, gave a presentation on cold water fishery resources (CFRs) in the Blackstone River watershed. He stressed the need for cold, oxygen-rich, clean waters to support brook trout and other cold-water species. He explained that only 16% of all stream miles in the MA portion of the watershed are considered cold water streams, and few of these are considered "robust" or high quality due to the prevalence of dams and ongoing development. We need to protect the limited robust waters and improve the marginalized ones through practices such as dam removal, culvert replacement, and habitat restoration of streams and the adjacent riparian zones. By controlling erosion at construction sites, we can keep streams free of suspended sediment (called turbidity) that harms fish and other aquatic organisms.

#### CFR Highlights of the Report Card:

- Seven of eight Headwater CFRs received a good or fair grade for water temperature.
- Five Headwater CFRs received an excellent grade for levels of dissolved oxygen, and three improved from 2017.
- Centerville Brook in Douglas was the only midreach (Upton-Blackstone) CFR that received a good grade for temperature. The other 10 sites were graded worse, including the West River at Hartford Ave in Upton and Emerson Brook in Uxbridge which both received poor grades.
- 11 of 12 CFRs in the midreach were graded excellent to fair for oxygen levels including Centerville Brook in Douglas, and Meadow and Emerson Brooks in Uxbridge.
- Warren Brook in Upton struggled with poor grades for temperature and oxygen.
- Most R.I. CFRs did well for temperature and oxygen.
- Turbidity got worse at four CFRs in the Blackstone River watershed during late summer and fall, including Meadow Brook in Uxbridge during July and September.
- Since 2008, water temperatures have generally held steady, showing no obvious trends upward or downward.
- Since 2008, dissolved oxygen levels have generally held steady; however, the midreach CFRs tend to fare worse than either the headwater or Rhode Island CFRs for this important water quality characteristic.

Ms. Thomas discussed an analysis conducted by Clark University on the BRC's 15 years of data for CFRs. The analysis identified Shrewsbury, Grafton, Sutton, Uxbridge, and Douglas as municipalities containing sites that repeatedly experienced lower levels of oxygen — a condition that can stress cold water species. The data review also identified the West River subwatershed as being an area of concern due to the number of CFR monitoring sites experiencing low oxygen levels as well as being an area undergoing increased residential development.

As part of the Volunteer Appreciation event, Ms. Thomas presented certificates to long-serving volunteers. All volunteers from 2018 received a complementary one-year membership to a local watershed organization as a thank-you gift.

JoAnne Holahan, Education Team Coordinator for the Blackstone River Watershed Association (BRWA) spoke about the BRC and BRWA working together to teach students, municipal planners, and communities about the need for watershed protection. She described classroom demonstrations, public tours of cold-water streams, family fishing events, and municipal presentations that are being conducted as part of a grant awarded to the BRC from the Massachusetts Environmental Trust. Summit participants were invited to take home a Blackstone Watershed Pledge card to help them put their commitment into action.

Mrs. Holahan commented, "The new Cold Water Fisheries component to the BRWA's Watershed & Us classroom program provides an opportunity for students to make an emotional connection that is essential for understanding and protecting the environment right outside their doors. Frannie, a little rubber fish, lives in the cold water stream model that gets polluted because of the way people are using and abusing the land around it. Students see firsthand how what we do on the land directly impacts our water and the animals that live in it. What's just as exciting is finding out that there are solutions to many of the pollution problems, and that they can play an active role those solutions!"

Peter Coffin, BRC Coordinator, rallied the audience with an overview of how far the river has come from its industrial working days of neglect to 2019 when the river and its tributaries are showing signs of recovery. This turnaround is due, in part, to EPA-mandated upgrades to wastewater treatment plants and to municipalities being required to implement effective storm water management practices.

Addressing the volunteers, Donna Williams said, "As you all know, the Blackstone River was the engine driving the industrial revolution not only here in the valley, but throughout the country. It continues to be the engine for water supply, recreation, wildlife, climate change resilience, economic sustainability, and educational opportunities. And each of you, by your commitment to this program, are critical advocates for and stewards of the Blackstone in your own local community." Ms. Thomas urged the volunteers to harness their citizen scientist role into that of a local watershed advocate by participating in community meetings and by supporting environmentally-informed candidates and proposals at election time.

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