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ON THE OUTDOORS

Making the decision to make a difference

By Candus Thomson

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If you're going to an outdoors function with a group of nature-type scientists, do not assume they have any influence over the conditions in the immediate area.

That was a take-away message Thursday morning as about 100 members of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and 50 volunteers from Harford County and the Department of Natural Resources gathered for some do-gooding at the Anita C. Leight Estuary Center in Abingdon.

Slabs of clouds the color of fireplace ashes had dumped buckets of rain in the pre-dawn hours. Otter Point Creek gushed a swollen ribbon of liquefied mud, and windblown trees shook off droplets that trickled down open collars and flecked eyeglasses.

"Is anyone here from the National Weather Service?" asked Capt. Michele Finn, an administrator with the National Ocean Service.

"Yes," came the muffled response from the poncho-clad group before her.

"These are the folks to blame," Finn said to laughter.

But who's going to yap about the weather in front of Finn? Although she's a boss now, Finn used to pilot NOAA hurricane hunting missions.

Nasty conditions could not dampen the enthusiasm of the volunteers, who had escaped their offices and to-do lists for some fresh air and an opportunity to reconnect with the outdoors. They tore out invasive weeds and planted trees. They plunged into still-frigid waters to plug aquatic vegetation into the creek bottom near the Pontoon Pier and to build an instrument platform for gathering wetlands data. A spring's worth of overgrowth disappeared from trails. Trackers located radio collar-wearing turtles and noted their condition.

Maybe the weather's got me down, but when taken in the context of the troubled 64,000-square-mile Chesapeake Bay watershed, heartfelt volunteer efforts like these feel like cheering at a Washington Nationals game. And President Barack Obama's executive order last month meant to jump-start faltering



bay cleanup efforts reminds us just how far from the finish line we remain after more than two decades of spinning our wheels.

But DNR's deputy secretary, Eric Schwaab, talked me off the ledge as the volunteers got ready to move out. A government with willpower and money can handle the technical challenges - building and upgrading sewage treatment plants and controlling runoff - but that's only part of the answer, he said.

"Seventeen million people live in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. The place we're falling short is when it comes to the thousands and millions of decisions being made every day that cumulatively make an impact," Schwaab said. "We need to put information into the hands of children and communities so that they make the right decisions."

That's where places like the estuary center, with its programs and volunteer work, come in.

The center is one-third of the Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (the other parts are Jug Bay, between Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties, and Monie Bay, a tributary of Tangier Sound).

The Otter Creek facility and Jug Bay both have outreach efforts: otterpointcreek.org and jugbay.org.

Imagine what 17 million volunteers could do.

The right thing

DNR employees can no longer moonlight in jobs that are in conflict with their state duties, according to a new ethics policy.

The change came as a result of information gathered in the investigation into the largest striped bass poaching case in Chesapeake Bay history that showed a biologist in the striped bass program held a tidal fish license and allocation that was used by one of the guilty watermen.

Although the state ethics policy governs activity in most circumstances, DNR Secretary John Griffin approved the additional measure June 9 to provide "specific, proactive guidance."

For example, the policy prohibits Fisheries Service employees and Natural Resources Police officers from holding commercial fishing licenses or Forest Service employees from engaging in a private forestry consulting business that applied for state permits. It also would have prevented the apparent conflict several years ago, when the deputy fisheries director continued to hold his commercial license.

Under the policy, employees had until Friday to tell their supervisors that they would discontinue their business within 60 days or apply to Griffin for a waiver.

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Making the decision to make a difference



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration employees Brent Ache (left) and Cassandra Lopez shovel and kick mud into place as they plant trees Thursday at the Melvin G. Bosley Wildlife Conservancy in Abingdon. (Baltimore Sun photo by Candus Thomson / June 19, 2009)

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