Watershed project raises flood safety awareness

By Joe Gentile
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Floodwaters from Hurricanes Irene, Lee and Superstorm Sandy raised rivers, streams and awareness about responsible watershed management. So has Cornell University Cooperative Extension's data-driven research from their Hudson Estuary Watershed Resiliency Project.

Program planning began last fall on the valley-wide initiative, said Liz LoGiudice, a Cornell Cooperative Extension environmental educator. Supported by the New York State Water Resources Institute at Cornell University, and the state Department of Environmental Conservation's Hudson River Estuary Program, the project ties stream dynamics to climate change.

"We're working in targeted sub-watersheds with other cooperative extensions," LoGiudice added.

Watersheds are defined land areas with wetlands, streams and other waterways that drain into a central water body. Both Columbia and Rensselaer counties are situated atop the Hudson River's Greater Stockport Watershed, LoGiudice said. Four counties, however, feed into the Hudson through the Catskill Watershed, she added.

Increases to both New York's average summer and winter temperatures have resulted in fewer days of snow cover, and heavier rainfall, researchers found. Since the 1950s, research showed the amount of two-inch rainfall events happening over a 48-hour stretch has surged by 67 percent statewide.

In 2011, Tropical Storm Irene devastated the Catskill Watershed, impacting Albany, Greene, Schoharie and Ulster counties. In Greene County, Prattsville Town Supervisor Kory O'Hara described the town's Main Street for a New York Times reporter as "a total loss." Statewide, Tropical Storm Irene caused an estimated $296 million of property damage.

Educators at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia & Greene Counties conducted roughly 15 presentations, over the last two months, LoGiudice said. Last month, educator Theresa Mayhew presented the Hudson Estuary Watershed Resiliency Project to the Hillsdale Town Board.

"We're hoping to do every municipality in the two watersheds," LoGiudice said.

The Lower Hudson Coalition of Conservation Districts has also collaborated in the creation of "Post-Flood Stream Intervention" trainings for engineers and highway personnel.

Cornell Cooperative Extension held a Greene County event last March that brought out employees from both town, and county, highway departments. Representatives from four counties, LoGiudice said, learned how to coordinate an emergency response, and what to do after the floodwaters subside.

Efforts to straighten out or deepen streams, or install berms, can reinforce underlying problems, LoGiudice said.

"When we think about rivers carrying valleys, that's a dynamic process," LoGiudice said.

Impermeable surfaces, such as parking lots and culverts, are disruptive, she added.

"We tend to not let streams do what they want to do, which is to move," LoGiudice said.

Training takes place again Thursday, July 25, at the Greene County Emergency Services facility in Cairo, from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

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