



**AQUARION**  
*Water Company*

*Stewards of the Environment*

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## **Aquarion Water Company, The Nature Conservancy save eels with environmentally friendly methods**

Aquarion Water Company and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) are working together on an experimental project to help migrating eels pass safely downstream from Aquarion's Aspetuck Reservoir in Easton, CT. Not only that, they're doing it with simple, environmentally friendly technology and clean, renewable resources.

Aquarion staff has long struggled with the problem of eels getting caught in pumps and grates at water treatment plants and pumping stations when they pass through the company's reservoirs to migrate to the ocean every autumn. Eels that do find their way into the treatment plants and pumping equipment never reach the ocean. However, TNC, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), **and** Aquarion are working toward a solution.

Lendeert DeJong, Manager of Watershed & Environmental Management (WEM), explained that because eels avoid bright light, WEM, TNC and the DEP worked out a method of steering the eels away from the Hemlocks reservoir intake grates using underwater lights powered by solar energy and a wind turbine. Off to the side of the grates is a large siphon tube that allows the eels to pass over the Aspetuck dam and continue their journey to the ocean.

The Nature Conservancy applied for and received a large grant from the Long Island Sound Futures Fund to support its collaborative project with Aquarion. Aquarion is providing a much-needed financial match for the project.

Charles V. Firlotte, Aquarion President and CEO, said he is grateful for the grant and acknowledged that the project would have been much more difficult to undertake without TNC's partnership and assistance from the DEP.

“This project is important to us,” Firlotte said. “It underscores our commitment to green solutions when we face environmental challenges and reinforces our work as stewards of the environment.”

Sally Harold, TNC’s Saugatuck River Watershed Project Director, said, “Not only is our collaboration with Aquarion providing important data about migration patterns of eel in the watershed, but we are developing what we hope will be a viable solution to provide safe downstream passage for these fish at other water supply reservoirs where eel are often trapped.”

### **Monitoring progress**

Since the lights were installed in late October, Brian Roach, Supervisor of Environmental Protection and Sally Harold from TNC have been monitoring a large fish trap placed at the siphon’s outlet to determine whether eels were, indeed, finding their way through the safe bypass route. They examine the eels they find in the trap to ensure they are unharmed, then release them to continue their downstream migration through the Aspetuck River to salt water.

Their work also will help the DEP. Steve Gephard, a fisheries biologist with the state DEP’s Inland Fisheries Division has been working to conserve and restore migratory fish runs for many years. “This project The Nature Conservancy and Aquarion have undertaken is an exciting opportunity,” Gephard said. “It is clear that this spawning run of eels needs protection, and these two groups have joined forces not only to help the eels in the affected watersheds, but to develop a technical approach that we can use in similar situations elsewhere in the state. We look forward to working with TNC and Aquarion in the next couple of years to study the performance of this new downstream bypass system.”

Aquarion staff estimate that approximately 200 eels get caught in the Hemlock Reservoir treatment plant each year as they journey from the Aspetuck Reservoir to Long Island Sound.

The Nature Conservancy has protected more than 119 million acres of land and 5,000 miles of rivers worldwide; and it operates more than 100 marine conservation projects globally. In Connecticut, TNC has helped protect more than 50,000 acres of land including Devil’s Den preserve in Weston and Redding and works in various watersheds

including the Saugatuck to protect and restore aquatic and terrestrial habitats critical to biodiversity.

Aquarion Water Company serves nearly 600,000 people in 39 communities throughout Connecticut. It is among the seven largest investor-owned water utility companies in the U.S., and the largest in New England.

#### Eel Facts

- Eels have an unusual life history that was a mystery for centuries. While scientists knew eels migrated from freshwater to saltwater to reproduce, no one knew until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century exactly where they spawned or how often they might spawn in their lifetimes.
- In the 1920s, scientists discovered that the eels living in the North American and European rivers that drain to the Atlantic Ocean all swim to an area of the Atlantic near the West Indies known as the Sargasso Sea to spawn just once before dying.
- After hatching, the tiny, nearly-transparent baby eels follow ocean currents thousands of miles from the Sargasso Sea to enter the tidal mouths, or estuaries, of rivers they apparently select at random to call home.
- Male eels remain and mature in the river's estuaries, while the females swim upstream. They live in the inland portions of the rivers for years before responding to the urge to swim downstream and return to the Sargasso Sea to spawn.
- The female eels also face other obstacles that impede their journeys from rivers all along the Eastern Seaboard to meet up with their mates. A diminished number of females reaching the ocean to spawn means fewer offspring, and this is believed to be a factor in the serious recent decline of eel populations.

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