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State wins EPA grant to restore watershed

The $800,000 grant will go toward fish habitat improvements in rivers and streams around Rhode Island, such as the Pawtuxet and Wood-Pawcatuck Rivers.

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Not long ago a local group began planning construction of a fish ladder that would help shad and herring get over the Pawtuxet Village dam and migrate upstream. Yesterday, their plans for the Pawtuxet River got a huge boost.

The Pawtuxet fish ladder as well as other fish habitat improvements in rivers and streams around Rhode Island are being financed by an $800,000 grant announced yesterday by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Rhode Island was one of 20 winners chosen out of 176 organizations and communities that applied for about $15 million in watershed restoration grants proposed by President Bush in his State of the Union address last year.

EPA Administrator Christie Whitman announced the winners during a news conference in New Jersey. She said Mr. Bush's Watershed Initiative generated good proposals from around the country. The 20 winners, she said, will serve as national models for other communities to follow.

The grant was awarded to an organization called The Partnership for Narragansett Bay. This group evolved from the Narragansett Bay Summit that was held in the Rhode Island Convention Center three years ago.

The partnership is a coalition of public and private groups from Rhode Island and Massachusetts based at the Coastal Institute at the University of Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay Campus. The group works to protect and restore Narragansett Bay and coastal Rhode Island ecosystems.

Grouped with other restoration projects under way in Charlestown and elsewhere in the Bay, the projects announced yesterday contribute to a major wave of work to restore environmental damage done by the pollution and dam-building that came with the Industrial Revolution.

"We're sort of on the brink of big things when it comes to fish restoration," said Richard Ribb, head of the state Department of Environmental Management's estuary program and spokesman for the Bay partnership.

Ribb said that when the partnership was packaging its proposal to EPA, it selected many projects that were already being designed and engineered. So as soon as the federal money is received, construction could begin in many cases.

The restoration plan proposed by the partnership focuses on Narragansett Bay,

but it also includes rehabilitation of the fishway on the Bradford Dam on the Wood-Pawcatuck River in Westerly.

About $300,000 will go toward continued efforts to restore eelgrass beds around the Bay. That project is being handled by Save the Bay and the University of Rhode Island. Eelgrass beds are prime fish habitat, but only about 100 acres of the state's eelgrass beds survived many years of pollution.

Two fish ladders also would be restored on the Three Mile River, a tributary of the Taunton River near Taunton, Mass. They will open up 1,000 acres of fish habitat that's connected to Narragansett Bay, according to Ribb.

The money also will be used for stormwater remediation work on the Narrow River and for Whitings Pond and Leesville Pond in Massachusetts.

The Pawuxet River fish ladder is being timed by the the Pawtuxet River Watershed Council to coincide with upgrades of the three sewage treatment plants that discharge effluent into the river.

Ribb said people sometimes see shad and herring swimming near the dam -- "a remnant migration." With a fish ladder, they could swim seven miles upstream.

The state's entire congressional delegation supported the original financing authorization.

The only other projects funded in New England were for the Charles River watershed in Massachusetts and the Meduxnekeag River in Maine.

The EPA also announced yesterday it was awarding $50,000 to local organizations to improve outreach programs promoting further cleanups of the Woonasquatucket and Blackstone Rivers.