

# RIVERKEEPER'S Almanac

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## ON POINT *with the*



Tom Leigh

## NEW RIVERKEEPER

It didn't take new Riverkeeper Tom Leigh long to discover one of Chester River Association's greatest strengths: its volunteers.

"The drive and the fervor is a surprise to me. I wasn't aware there were so many people working so hard for this organization," said Leigh, hired in January after a four-month search. "They come in the office, they go to meetings, they move

in political circles. It's stunning how intricate that network is."

Leigh, a 37-year-old biologist, grew up in Queen Anne's County and has a rich background in marine biological restoration. He is CRA's third Riverkeeper, succeeding Tony Prochaska, now an aquatic ecologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

"It's exciting to actually be part of a common goal that's so important to the area locally. Rather than writing a report that gets filed away in a cabinet, or performing research that may not be pertinent down the road, this is work we all have a vested interest in," Leigh said, commenting on his new role as the watershed's chief advocate. "It's my back yard. I'd like to watch out for it."

Leigh's top priority: septic upgrades. Leigh and CRA Septic Specialist Jennifer Hicks have joined forces to convince homeowners in the Chester River watershed to take advantage of state funding that pays for the installation of nitrogen-reduc-

ing systems on existing septic systems. Why that focus? Septic contributes 10 percent of the total nitrogen pollution to the Chester River and its tributaries. Leigh himself has applied for an upgrade. "I'm a homeowner with a septic field in the critical area buffer," he says. "I want to get on the list. I want to practice what I preach."

In December, the Queen Anne's County Commissioners passed a bill that will require bio nutrient removal septic systems for all newly constructed homes built in the critical area. CRA was behind the measure. Now, Leigh is lobbying the Kent County Commissioners to require all new septic fields in the county to have the technology – not just in the critical area. "We want to turn it up a notch," he notes.

Leigh, a 1992 graduate of Washington College, worked most recently as a project manager in the restoration division of Environmental Concern, a firm in St. Michaels that constructs and restores wetlands. He was also a resident director of Hofstra University Marine Lab in Jamaica, a biologist at the New Jersey State Aquarium and a researcher/instructor at Marine Science Consortium on Wallops Island, Va. He got his master's in biology from Hofstra.

He grew up on the mouth of the Wye, and still lives on family property there with his wife Courtney, a conservation manager at the Chesapeake Bay Environmental Center.

"There was no Play Station growing up. Your entertainment was your back yard. I sailed, crabbed, fished," says Leigh. "It's still my entertainment – and my passion."

– Ellen Uzelac

## CRA *pushes* AG CONSERVATION

Chester River Association has revved up its agricultural outreach program – hosting its first-ever ag conservation breakfasts and offering free memberships to farmers in the watershed.

Coming soon: the launch of a pilot program to encourage farmers to plant switchgrass that ultimately would be used as a heating source.

A total of about 50 farmers from Kent and Queen Anne's counties attended the two breakfasts in January. A third is scheduled for mid-summer.

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CRA conservation planners Virgil Turner, left, and Paul Spies, right, consult with Chino Farms manager Evan Miles

“These are educational meetings to demonstrate to the ag community that we are more of a resource and a partner than a watchdog. The big thing is to build relationships,” notes Paul Spies, one of CRA’s two agriculture conservation planners. “Healthy farms are in the best interest of the Chester River. That’s basically the bottom line for us.”

### **Farm funding rundown**

At the two meetings, held at Sportsman’s Inn outside of Kennedyville and Tilghman Terrace in Centreville, county Soil Conservation District representatives gave a rundown of the federal and state funding available to farmers who use best management practices.

In addition to money for planting cover crops, there are cost-sharing programs for irrigation water management, the repair of old ponds, the use of low-hazard pest management spray technology, phragmites control, the creation of wildlife habitats and manure transportation programs.

New this year, according to Queen Anne’s County rep Tony Riggi: programs to help offset the costs of installing structures that trap nutrients in farm ditches and using additives that treat poultry agricultural waste.

Pat Rhodes, a fourth-generation farmer in Queen Anne’s, said many people fail to realize that farmers are often good stewards of the land. She and her husband, who grow grain and raise beef cattle, began using cost-sharing programs in 1971, planting grass strips to protect run-off from going into the Chester River and streams. The first five years of the program, they personally financed \$50,000 in improvements.

### **‘Filling a gap’**

“One thing about farmers is we’re always leery of others telling us what to do,” added Rhodes, saying CRA’s agricultural outreach program is “filling a gap.” “We don’t need to be adversaries. We’ve always wished for something like this.”

Farmers at the Kent County breakfast also had the opportunity to hear Ken Staver, a University of Maryland scientist at the Wye Research and Education Center in Queenstown, talk about the water quality benefits of planting cover crops. Staver gave a presentation on switchgrass at the Queen Anne’s meeting. Here’s what he said:

- **ON COVER CROPS:** The headline here isn’t surface run-off from fields but the dissolved nitrogen that seeps deep into groundwater and ends up feeding streams and rivers. Corn and soybeans do a good job of taking up nitrogen from soil. But after they’re harvested, the soil remains active and that’s why cover crops – or winter cereals: rye, wheat and barley – are so important. “It’s a race,” says Staver. “Is the river going to get it or is the plant going to get it?” Cover crops are very good at scrubbing nitrates out of water. Two other reasons to plant winter cereals: soil moisture benefits and weed control. “Think of it as a pipeline from the field to the river. You’re putting cleaner water in the pipeline,” he adds. “And what you’re doing today could have an effect years from now because that’s how much time it can take to travel to the river.”
- **ON SWITCHGRASS:** A plant native to the Eastern Shore, switchgrass has water quality and energy benefits. A warm season grass, it works well in riparian buffers and Staver says it’s easy to plant and grow although it takes two to three years to reach full production potential. The challenge: creating a market for switchgrass. Staver burns switchgrass to heat a building at the Wye Research and Education Center. He believes switchgrass pellets, already tested in Europe, may be the wave of the future.

CRA, meanwhile, is about to partner with the Harry R. Hughes Center for AgroEcology at Wye Center on a project to grow switchgrass on 100 acres in the Chester River watershed. Bob Parks, CRA’s executive director, said the organization’s interest in switchgrass stems from a Chesapeake Bay Commission report last fall that suggested that if farmers in the Chesapeake Bay watershed produce 300,000 additional acres of corn to meet corn-based ethanol needs, “it could wipe out the nitrogen removal program of the last 10 years.”

“Switchgrass is better than cover crops in terms of holding the soil, absorbing the nitrogen and it has a high energy value,” added Parks. “The problem right now is farmers don’t have a market for it. But there’s not going to be a market if farmers don’t grow the stuff.”



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# 2008 Legislative Update

Chester River Association has announced a three-pronged advocacy agenda in the Maryland legislature this year:

**Cover crop funding** The most important legislation for CRA is a bill which will determine how the \$50 million Chesapeake 2010 Trust Fund is allocated and the extent that it is used to reduce nutrient pollution. "This is critical. We need as large a percentage as possible to go into cover crops," according to CRA Executive Director Bob Parks. "We need to have cover crops behind corn if we are ever going to impact the Chester River." At press time, it looked like the trust fund was in peril.

**Septic upgrades** After agriculture, CRA wants to see funding from the Trust Fund allocated for home septic upgrades. Septic contributes 10 percent of the nitrogen to the Chester River – the most ignored nitrogen problem in the entire Chesapeake Bay watershed, notes Parks. In December, the Queen Anne’s County Commissioners voted to require bio nutrient removal septic systems for all newly constructed homes in the critical area, the first county in the state to do so. CRA had worked with the commissioners on the project. The organization is now working to get a similar or tougher law implemented in Kent County. Meanwhile, Parks says: "Wouldn't it be great if the state passed a law?"

**Critical Area enforcement** CRA supports efforts to update and enhance the Critical Area Act, whose spotty enforcement has led to the destruction of natural buffers along shorelines. "It's poorly enforced and inconsistent. You need more enforcement and it has to be done at the state level," says Parks. On top of that, the critical area maps need to be updated. "The maps that are being used today were drawn up in the mid-80s and because of bay and river erosion, the critical area has changed," according to Parks. "It's clear the maps need to change, too."

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Anthony's passion for the Chesapeake Bay runs deep. In 2000, she and her husband, Gibson, started paddling in their homemade canoe from where the bay starts at Cooperstown, N.Y. Their 50-day journey down the Susquehanna River to Havre de Grace and on to Cape Charles, Va. spanned 700 miles. "It's left a lasting impression on me," says Anthony. "I was able to follow that thread of water that connects us all." In addition to her work with CRA, she is on the advisory board of Echo Hill Outdoor School.

Anthony says her work with the river association has made her more aware of "the political side of what we need to do to help the Chesapeake Bay." She adds: "It's about the laws – fixing them, changing them."

Meanwhile, in the classroom, Heidi Anthony continues to care "a whole awful lot."

As she puts it: "I know some of the kids will develop my same passion. It makes

a difference in their lives to see adults making a difference. Sure, there's a lot of attitude with seventh- and eighth-graders, and some will never get it. But the majority will remember what it is we were doing. They'll have a memory, even if it's a playful one. And there will be enough of a hook that when as adults they are making decisions as citizens, they'll be that much wiser because of that memory."

*Heidi Anthony with, from left to right, students Jimmy Johnson, Jordan Price and Sarah Taylor*



## Upcoming SPECIAL EVENTS

Monday, March 31

### "Get The Dirt Out"

CRA Watershed Coordinator Brent Walls will host a training program on how to identify whether there are erosion problems at construction sites. The program will take place from 5:30 – 7 p.m. at CRA headquarters at 100 N. Cross St. in Chestertown. For more details, contact Walls at 410-810-7556.

Thursday, April 10

### Chester Tester Wrap-up

CRA will announce the findings of the work Chester Testers did in 2007. Also to be announced at the evening event: the Chester River Report Card, created by ECO Check, a program funded by the Chesapeake Bay Program. Contact Brent Walls at 410-810-7556 for information.

## Parting Thoughts: Caring ‘a whole awful lot’

When Heidi Usilton Anthony taught early in her career at Echo Hill Outdoor School, she was struck by a verse from Dr. Seuss’ environmental tale, “The Lorax,” that she never forgot:

“...unless someone like you cares  
a whole awful lot,  
nothing’s going to get better,  
it’s not....”

It’s a message that Anthony, a social studies and science teacher at Radcliffe Creek School in Chestertown, carries to the classroom every day. She and her seventh- and eighth-graders have developed a wetland restoration project. They’ve raised and released diamondback terrapins. They’ve grown underwater grasses and participated in a schoolwide Green Day.



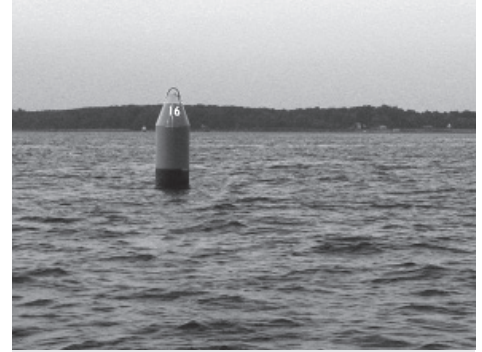
In January, the Chesapeake Bay Trust gave the 38-year-old Anthony its Teacher of the Year Award for excellence in environmental education in an elementary or middle school setting.

“I just care so much and I think that all goes back to growing up here. I have this love for the outdoors innately,” says Anthony, who serves on Chester River Association’s board of directors. “The ‘you’ in that verse is each and every single one of us. Unless we care about the bay, and the Chester River, nothing’s going to get better.”

Anthony attended Washington College for a year and a half, then taught at Echo Hill for three years. A classroom teacher for 14 years, she’s a graduate of Georgia Southern University. Since 1998, Anthony has taught at Radcliffe, an alternative environment for students with learning differences.

“It’s such a creative place. Students here are learning in non-traditional ways on a multi-sensory level. I love the environmental educational experience and it just fits together here,” says Anthony.

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