

Planned Blackbird Creek land acquisition, to be made with federal funding and with DNREC's support, will bring 560 acres under conservation and enhances Delaware's estuarine area

The Blackbird-Millington Conservation Corridor is a pristine blue-green ribbon of water and woodland extending from the mouth of Blackbird Creek on the Delaware Bay in southern New Castle County to the town of Millington in neighboring Maryland. Today, that treasured ribbon stands to be widened with additional land preserved for the future.

An agreement has been reached to purchase 360 acres along Eagles Nest Road near the headwaters of Blackbird Creek for \$3.24 million—including \$3 million in eligible federal funds. Negotiations also are pending to acquire a second 200-acre property.

Both tracts are adjacent to the core area of the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve (DNERR), of which Blackbird Creek is a component area, and both contain significant freshwater wetlands, extensive mature forest cover, and known and considered species of concern.

The acquisition comes via an announcement that the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has selected for FY 2007 funding eligibility the two properties as land conservation projects in what has been called one of the most ecologically valuable areas remaining on the Delmarva Peninsula.



Photo by David Carter

An aerial view of Blackbird Creek at the core area of the Delaware National Estuarine Research Reserve (DNERR)

The projects, for which approximately \$5.7 million in federal funding has been requested through NOAA's Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program, will conserve the

existing natural resources on the land and restore some areas altered from their natural state, such as returning farmland to meadow and forest land. The Eagles Nest Tract and the second property were selected from NOAA's competitively-ranked list as ready and eligible for funding. Matching funds for the projects will come from a combination of in-kind land purchases, Delaware Open Space funds and private partner contributions.

NOAA's Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELCP) was established in 2002 to protect coastal and estuarine lands considered important for their ecological, conservation, recreational, historical or aesthetic value. With this protection of critical importance in Delaware, adding such properties is part of a proactive program to protect lands currently threatened by the rapid residential development underway in southern New Castle County.



Photo by Joanna Wilson

Roger L. Jones Jr., state director for The Nature Conservancy, speaks of his organization's support for land conservation during the Blackbird Creek land acquisition announcement. DNREC Secretary John A. Hughes, U.S. Representative Michael N. Castle and U.S. Senator Thomas R. Carper joined him in lauding the planned purchase of more than 560 acres of stream and woodland.

DNREC Secretary John A. Hughes thanked Delaware's Congressional delegation and NOAA for their role in the land preservation. "The Blackbird Creek watershed area is especially vital, with its pristine waters, thriving ecosystems and lush landscape that has changed very little since the arrival of the first Europeans in the 1600s," Sec. Hughes said. "I cannot overstate the importance of preserving this area, both as a yardstick against which Delaware's other watersheds can be measured, and for the enjoyment and enlightenment of future generations."

Delaware's Congressional delegation – Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., Senator Thomas R. Carper and Representative Michael N. Castle – all spoke of the Blackbird's beauty and the need to preserve it. "I'm proud of the cooperative effort to preserve this precious watershed from unchecked development," said Sen. Biden. "In the face of sprawl, every responsible step we take to defend nature's gifts is a big one. Today is a great day for all of Delaware's treasured landscapes."

"The Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program is critical for the protection of coastal and estuarine lands. Protecting open space is particularly important in Delaware, where rapid development is underway, and the federal funding for the land purchase will help ensure that Blackbird Creek, with wetlands, forest, and important species, remains ecologically valuable," Rep. Castle said.

DNERR was established as a federal/state partnership between NOAA and DNREC in 1993 under the federal Coastal Zone Management Act. DNERR preserves and manages the natural resources in the Reserve as a place for applied research, education and outreach programs that promote a better understanding of Delaware's estuarine and coastal resources.

Since 2003, five parcels totaling 384.47 acres have been added to Blackbird, with federal programs contributing close to \$4.1 million towards the purchases. The first major purchase was the 62-acre old Odessa campground in 2004, one of three purchases that received funding from NOAA. In 2006, the first property to be purchased with NOAA's CELCP funds was the 163.87-acre Ellingsworth Tract of the Blackbird Reserve Wildlife Area, consisting of agricultural lands and mature forest. Both the Ellingsworth Tract and the new Eagles Nest Tract will become a new 523-acre state wildlife area managed by the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife.