North Carolina Ecosystem Enhancement Program (NCEEP)

The North Carolina Ecosystem Enhancement Program (NCEEP) is responsible for providing ecologically effective compensatory mitigation in advance of permitted impacts associated with road projects and other development activities. The fundamental mission of the program is to restore, enhance and protect key watershed functions in the 17 river basins across the state. This is accomplished through the implementation of wetlands, streams and riparian buffer projects within selected local watersheds. The vital watershed functions that NCEEP seeks to restore and protect include water quality, floodwater conveyance and storage, fisheries and wildlife habitat.

The NCEEP is not a grant program but can implement its restoration projects cooperatively with other state or federal programs such as the Section 319 Program. Combining NCEEP-funded restoration or preservation projects with 319 or other local watershed initiatives (e.g., those funded through the Clean Water Management Trust Fund or local/regional Land Trusts) increases the potential to improve the water quality, hydrologic and habitat functions within selected watersheds.

The selection of optimal sites for NCEEP mitigation projects is founded on a basinwide and local watershed planning approach which results, respectively, in the development of River Basin Restoration Priorities and Local Watershed Plans.

In developing River Basin Restoration Priorities (RBRP) (formerly called Watershed Restoration Plans), the NCEEP identifies local watersheds (14-digit hydrologic units) with the greatest need and opportunity for restoration, enhancement or preservation projects. These high-priority watersheds are called "targeted local watersheds" (TLWs). Targeted local watersheds are identified, in part, using information compiled by DWQs programmatic activities (e.g., Basinwide Assessment Reports). Local factors considered in the selection of TLWs include: water quality impairment, habitat degradation, the presence of critical habitat or significant natural heritage areas, the presence of water supply watersheds or other high-quality waters, the status of riparian buffers, estimates of impervious cover, existing or planned transportation projects, and the opportunity for local government partnerships. Recommendations from local resource agency professionals and the presence of existing or planned watershed projects are given significant weight in the selection of TLWs. In essence, targeted local watersheds represent those areas within a river basin where NCEEP resources can be focused for maximum benefit to local watershed functions.

The 2003 RBRP for the Broad River Basin can be found on the NCEEP website (http://www.nceep.net/services/restplans/watershedplans.html). A revised RBRP with updated selections for Targeted Local Watersheds will be posted to this website by 2009.

The NCEEP also develops Local Watershed Plans (LWPs), usually within targeted local watersheds identified in the RBRPs. Through the local watershed planning process, NCEEP conducts watershed characterization and field assessment tasks to identify critical stressors in local watersheds. The NCEEP planners and their consultants coordinate with local resource professionals and local governments to identify optimal watershed projects and management strategies to address the major functional stressors identified. The LWPs prioritize restoration/enhancement projects, preservation sites, and best management practices (BMP) projects that will provide water quality improvement, habitat protection and other

environmental benefits to the local watershed. In the Broad River Basin, NCEEP has led two local watershed planning efforts.

From 2003 to 2005, NCEEP managed an intensive watershed assessment and planning effort in the Catheys Creek watershed, a 45 square mile area in Rutherford County. NC State University's Watershed Education for Communities and Officials coordinated community input provided by a diverse group of local stakeholders, who met throughout the process to identify community priorities and oversee the development of the watershed plan. Although only Catheys Creek and Hollands Creek are on the 303(d) list, moderately degraded conditions were found in streams throughout the watershed. Key stressors for streams in the watershed are excessive sedimentation, stormwater impacts, widespread fecal coliform bacteria contamination, heavy metals below old gold mining operations and the town of Spindale, and illegal dumping of solid waste in streams. The Catheys Creek Watershed Management Plan names strategies to address these problems, including stream and wetland restoration, buffer planting, livestock best management practices, and stormwater best management practices. The plan is available on the NCEEP website.

A fast-track local watershed planning effort was undertaken for the Cove Creek watershed from 2006 to 2007. This 80 square mile area is located in a primarily rural area of McDowell and Rutherford Counties. The objectives of this LWP were to quickly assess the integrity of streams and identify stream and wetland restoration and enhancement opportunities. Most headwater streams in this watershed are currently forested; below these steeper sloped areas, cattle, hay fields, and residential development are common. Current stressors for streams in the watershed are stream incision, inadequate forested buffer, sedimentation, streambank erosion, livestock access, and possible nutrient enrichment. The largest threat to stream integrity, however, is development for retirement and second homes, which is occurring in the forested headwater areas. The plan is available on the NCEEP website.

NCEEP PROJECTS IN THE BROAD RIVER BASIN

In the Broad River Basin, NCEEP has eight restoration projects in process or already constructed, which include approximately 71,000 ft of stream restoration/enhancement, 9,000 ft of stream preservation, and 11 acres of wetland restoration. They include Big Harris Creek, Blockhouse Creek, Cane Creek, Cleghorn Creek, Little White Oak Creek, Morgan Creek, and Puzzle Creek.

NCEEP has acquired or is in the process of acquiring seven high quality preservation projects in the Broad River Basin. NCEEPs high quality preservation program works in conjunction with other conservation interests to protect tracts of land that have high natural resource value. The seven projects include Lone Mountain, Melrose Mountain, North Pacolet, Skyuka Creek, and three tracts near the Green River. For more information on these high quality preservation projects, see NCEEP website.

Restoration and high quality preservation projects mentioned above are in four counties of the Broad River basin, provided in detail below.

Table 11-1: Number of NCEEP Projects in Broad River Basin Counties

County	High quality preservation	Stream/wetland restoration
Cleveland	--	2
McDowell	--	1
Polk	6	2
Rutherford	1	3

NCEEP is actively pursuing additional projects and expects to implement both stream and wetland projects, focusing on the Catheys Creek and Cove Creek LWP areas. For more information on NCEEP projects in the Broad River basin, contact Mike McDonald, the western region supervisor, at (828) 231-7912 or the main NCEEP office at (919) 715-0476.

For additional information about NCEEPs Project Implementation efforts, follow this link. For additional information about NCEEP in general, including its various program activities and products, visit the NCEEP website.