

PA Environment Digest

An Update On Environmental Issues In PA

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Formerly Polluted Bennett Branch To Be Stocked With 1,000 Trout In Elk County

Thanks to the Department of Environmental Protection's successful Hollywood acid mine drainage treatment plant, the [Bennett Branch](#) and Toby Creek watershed associations and the Potter County Anglers' Club will celebrate the waterway's rebirth on April 6 and stock 1,000 trout above and below the plant near the Clearfield-Elk counties border.

"In less than a year, the Hollywood plant has treated 21 separate discharges from four abandoned deep mines, raising the pH from 3.8 to neutral and removing harmful metals like iron, aluminum and manganese," DEP Deputy Secretary for Water Management Kelly Heffner said. "Bennett Branch is now so healthy that trout stocking will be done for the first time, which is sure to increase tourism in that area and benefit local angler-related businesses."

The trout stocking will be done by the Potter County Anglers' Club as part of the Fish and Boat Commission's Cooperative Nursery Program.

"This is a milestone in the recovery of the Bennett Branch," Fish and Boat Commission Executive Director John Arway said. "Thanks to remediation efforts led by DEP, I am pleased to say that it is now fishable again. The Bennett Branch is one of the few places east of the Mississippi River where one can now fish for trout and listen to the bugle of Rocky Mountain elk."

The \$14.5 million plant began operating in July 2012 and covers 41 acres. Designed by DEP's Bureau of Abandoned Mine Reclamation and operated by the agency's Bureau of Conservation and Restoration, it can treat an average of 4,000 gallons per minute of acid mine drainage.

The project was funded by \$12 million from the state's Capital Budget and \$2 million from the Growing Greener program. Annual operating and maintenance costs of \$400,000 are being funded by DEP's Acid Mine Drainage Set-Aside program, which is funded by a fee placed on each ton of coal mined in the country.

The federal Office of Surface Mining collects the fees and returns some of the money to states like Pennsylvania that have historic acid mine drainage problems.

DEP chose the Bennett Branch location for the project because about 70 percent of the land within its nearly 400-square-mile watershed is on state game land or state forest land. It is also within the scenic, rugged area designated as [PAWilds](#), and it is the home of Pennsylvania's elk herd.

The local Bennett Branch Watershed Association has been an active partner with DEP for many years in watershed restoration efforts and will be awarded one of the [Governor's 2013 Awards for Environmental Excellence](#) for another project in Elk County.

The Hollywood plant mixes lime with the acid water; removes the metals in a 180-foot diameter clarifier; and pumps alkaline sludge back into the deep mines. A major treatment component of the facility is a 4.5-acre polishing pond, which holds 10 million gallons of water five to nine feet deep, depending on flow. Water flows through the pond before entering the stream.

The plant, built by Kukurian Contracting Inc. of Export, Westmoreland County, also has a number of safety features, including an emergency generator with enough fuel stored on site to operate the facility for two days in the event of a major power failure. If necessary, a plant operator can use a laptop computer to remotely control the facility.

In addition to the Hollywood plant, DEP has been working since 2004 with the Bennett Branch Watershed Association, several other state and federal agencies and the active mining industry to reclaim abandoned mine sites and improve water quality throughout the Bennett Branch Watershed.

Since then, more than 1,000 acres of abandoned mine land has been reclaimed; six coal refuse piles have been reprocessed; and five smaller mine drainage discharges have been treated with wetland, or passive, treatment systems. The majority has been on state game lands or state forest lands.