DEC, Suffolk County, Town of Southampton, and Peconic Estuary Partnership Announce Start of Construction of $1 Million Fish Passage Through Woodhull Dam

Fish Passage Will Restore Critical Habitat for River Herring and American Eels in the Peconic River

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), Suffolk County, town of Southampton, and Peconic Estuary Partnership (PEP) today announced the start of construction on a nearly $1 million fish passage through Woodhull Dam on the Little River in Riverhead. The fish passage is essential to restoring critical spawning and maturation habitat for river herring and American eel and will help produce sustainable populations of fish species that are valuable resources for a healthy and productive marine ecosystem.

"Protecting Long Island's natural diversity is critical to the region's environment, health, and economy, and our ongoing efforts are successful thanks to collaborative efforts like this one helping to implement this fish passage project," **DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said.** "River herring and eel are crucial marine species, and DEC thanks Suffolk County, Southampton, the Peconic Estuary Partnership and others for working together on this project to restore vital fish habitat that will help local fish populations thrive in the Peconic River."

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said, "The successful collaboration between DEC, the County, the Peconic Estuary Partnership and the Town of Southampton is a great example of governmental partners working together to leverage funds from multiple sources in order to get an important project done. This new fish passage will restore access to nearly 100 acres of high-quality habitat for river herring and American eel within the preserved lands of Cranberry Bog Preserve and Wildwood Lake, helping to foster a healthy ecosystem and enhancing our natural resources."

Southampton Town Councilman John Bouvier said, "I am happy to support the Woodhull Dam fish passage project, as it exemplifies cooperation across numerous government agencies, the Peconic Estuary Partnership, Suffolk County, and the Town of Southampton Community Preservation Fund. This partnership funds the much needed infrastructure necessary to protect and restore the Peconic River system and habitat access that will allow the continued growth of the River Herring population. My thanks to all involved that have made this possible."

Peconic Estuary Partnership Executive Director Joyce Novak said, "PEP is proud of the extensive partnership that has worked together to make this project a reality and grateful to the funding bodies that have recognized the importance of River Herring in the Peconic Estuary. The fish ladder at Woodhull Dam will have great ecological benefit to the whole Peconic system and is a testament to the East End's commitment to healthy habitats and clean waters."

Jaime Masterson, Fish Biologist at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said, "Reconnecting access to Wildwood Lake and an additional 95 acres of spawning and rearing grounds is essential to sustain populations of anadromous fish species, such as herring and American eel. River herring are a vital commercial species and forage fish for numerous seabirds, marine mammals, and a wide range of fish."

The Woodhull Dam fish passage will restore access to 90 acres of high-quality habitat for river herring and American eel in the Cranberry Bog Preserve and Wildwood Lake, more than doubling the amount of spawning and maturation habitat currently available for river herring on

the Peconic River. The Peconic River is home to one of Long Island's premier river herring spawning runs. The River is Long Island's longest river and one of only four rivers classified as 'Wild, Scenic, and Recreational Rivers' on Long Island. The Peconic Estuary system is one of 28 nationally recognized estuaries in the United States designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

DEC, Suffolk County, town of Southampton, and PEP worked collaboratively to secure nearly $1 million for the design and construction of the fish passage. Funding was provided by DEC's Water Quality Improvement Project (WQIP) Program, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Fish Passage Funds, Suffolk County's Water Quality Protection and Restoration Program, Suffolk County Capital Funds, and town of Southampton's Community Preservation Fund Water Quality Improvement Project Plan.

The design for the fishway includes a series of weirs or "steps," and resting pools to help the fish climb upstream. A separate eel passage with specialized substrate will be mounted alongside the fishway to help eels move through the passage. These structures will bypass the current culvert and will be constructed through the existing dam. In addition, project partners will install a video monitoring system near the exit of the fishway to quantify the number of diadromous fish using the fish passage and monitor fish abundance.

Fish passage at Woodhull Dam is a critical step in achieving the goal to restore 300 acres of diadromous fish habitat in the Peconic River. Additional fish passage projects are currently in progress at two remaining barriers on the main stem of the Peconic River. The completion of this project and other fish passage projects on the Peconic River have the potential to significantly expand river herring and American eel populations. Increased river herring and American eel populations will enhance biodiversity of the Peconic Estuary and contribute to the essential cycling of nutrients within this ecosystem. These species are important food sources for many commercially and recreationally important fish species, such as bluefish and striped bass, migratory birds, including osprey and herons, the river otter, and other mammals.

Alewife below the Woodhull Dam on the Little River
(Courtesy of Byron Young)