

📍 **MUNICIPAL CASE STUDY**

Cooks Creek Watershed Association, Pennsylvania

The Cooks Creek Watershed Association (CCWA) achieves its goals by working with its municipalities, providing education and public outreach, and serving on environmental advisory councils (EACs), planning commissions, and open space commissions.



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Background

CCWA was created in 1974 and has very active volunteer board members. These individuals may be among the most important contributors to the success of water quality protection efforts in Durham and Springfield townships in Bucks County. Many have been active for over 30 years and are passionate about watershed protection. CCWA board member Hans Reimann’s passion for open space began as a child exploring the woods and streams in his backyard. In the early 2000s, he joined Springfield Township’s Open Space Committee. “I knew I needed to get involved after hearing a local official discuss removing trees along a stream so they don’t fall into the stream.”

Water Resources

Located in northeastern Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the 30-square-mile Cooks Creek Watershed drains to the Delaware River. The majority of the watershed is in Springfield Township (70.29 percent) and Durham Township (19.39 percent). Smaller portions of the watershed drain Lower Saucon, Upper Saucon, and Williams townships in Northampton County and Haycock and Richland townships in Bucks County. The watershed is underlain with limestone bedrock and contains a high-quality drinking water aquifer that serves many of the residents. It is classified as an Exceptional Value Cold Water Fishery under the Pennsylvania Chapter 93 Water Quality Standards, as it supports a wild brown trout and native brook trout fishery. In addition, the watershed contains numerous rare and endangered species, was rated Priority 1 in the 1999 Bucks County Natural Areas Inventory, and is designated an area of special concern by the Highlands Coalition.

Quick Stats

Cooks Creek Watershed

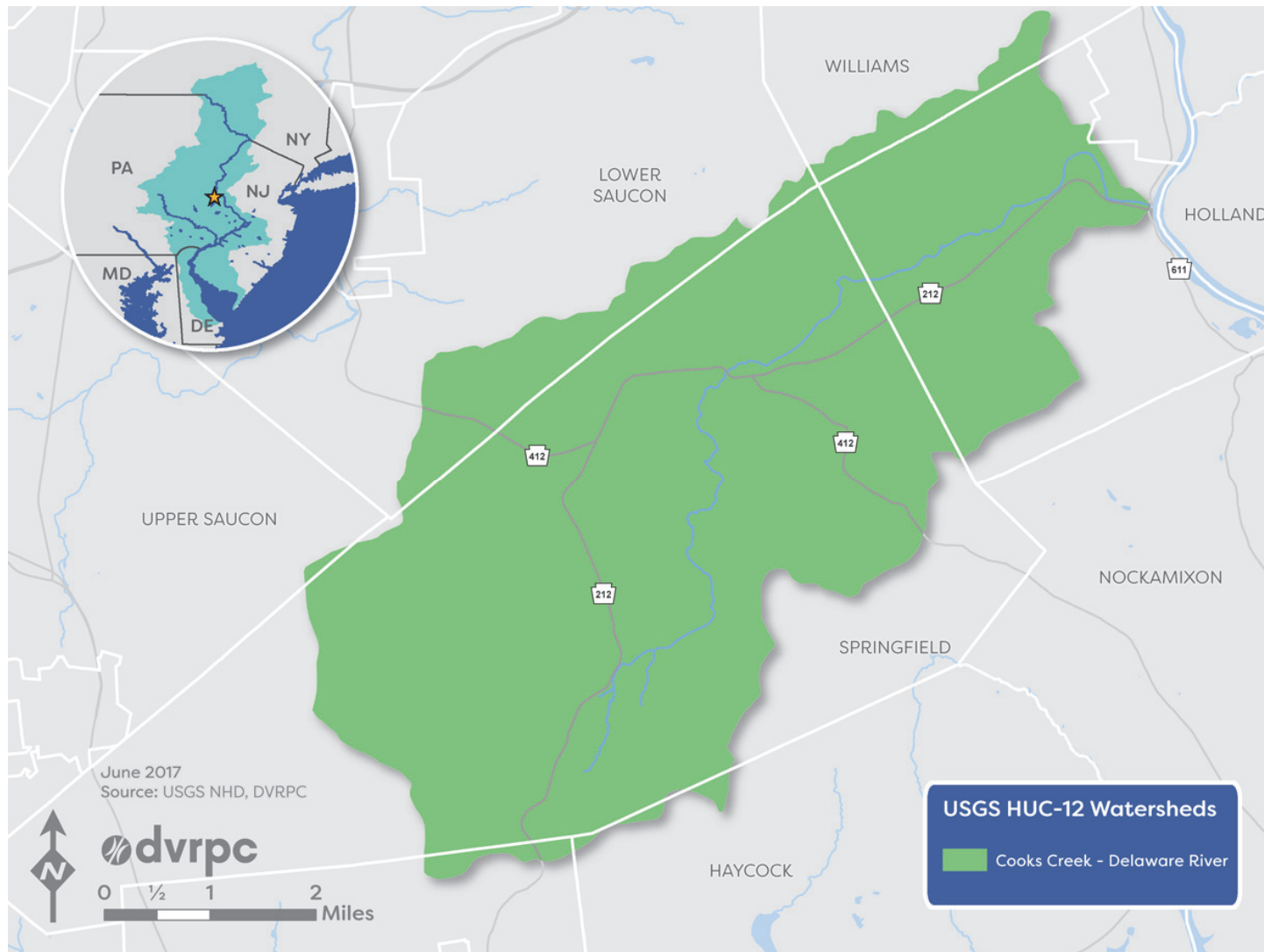
Major adjoining waterbody:
 Delaware River

Land area: 29.6 square miles

Other special characteristics:
 Exceptional Value watershed, natural brook trout fishery

Watershed association: Formed in 1974

Map: Cooks Creek Watershed



Watershed protection efforts began in the early 2000s with the development of the Cooks Creek Watershed Conservation Plan (CCWCP) by the Durham Township EAC. The CCWCP was created in response to concerns about a water quality “crisis” in the form of increased development pressure in adjacent townships, protecting the limestone aquifer drinking water supply, and the proposed development of a petroleum farm. A member of the Durham Township Planning Commission and CCWA explains: “When there’s a crisis, people rally around to protect what we have here. If everything’s going okay, we’re kind of complacent.”

While there is no formal agreement between Durham and Springfield townships, the board members of CCWA work across jurisdictions to integrate protection of the watershed into municipal planning documents. A core group of watershed association members participates on multiple boards and commissions, including the EACs, planning commissions, and open space commissions. They have been instrumental in integrating watershed protection into municipal land use and development ordinances. This cross-participation allows the environmental group to influence policy and provide education, and fosters communications across

municipalities. The importance of this work is noted by a member of the Durham Township Planning Commission and CCWA, Lois Oleksa: “Water is a basic thing that all of us humans need—can’t live without it.”

CCWA has become the “go-to” resource for municipal officials on watershed-related topics and has also been the driving force behind starting up the EACs and securing grant funding for watershed activities. “One of the watershed association’s goals is to be on different boards (planning commission and EAC) in the township so that we can influence policy and educate others. It has led to the betterment of things for citizens/residents,” notes Lois Oleksa.

Integrating Watershed Planning into Municipal Planning

The CCWCP was funded through a Rivers Conservation Grant and a Growing Greener Grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection. The main goal of the document was to provide the basis for developing comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances that take into account the current quality of the watershed, the quantity of available drinking water, and its sensitivity to degradation. As such, one of the plan recommendations was to update the Comprehensive Plan and zoning ordinance for both Durham and Springfield townships. This plan has been instrumental in integrating watershed protection into township land use and development guidelines.

“I knew I needed to get involved after hearing a local official discuss removing trees along a stream so they don’t fall into the stream.”

- Hans Reimann, CCWA board member and member of Springfield Township’s Open Space Committee

Through the dedicated work of CCWA board members, both townships have since integrated the CCWCP into their comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance to help protect water resources. The Durham Township 2006 Comprehensive Plan incorporates the CCWCP by reference and states, “The Plan is invaluable as a tool for identifying the important features and significance of the watershed. It also establishes a framework for developing a program for the protection and proper management of the watershed.” In addition, the overall goal of the plan is “to maintain the high quality of life in the Township by protecting the natural resources—including the Cooks Creek Watershed, prime agricultural land, the floodplain of the Delaware River and its tributary streams, the limestone geology and the wooded slopes.”

Some examples of where the CCWCP plan recommendations have been incorporated into the township zoning ordinances and other land use regulations include:

Key Factors for Success

Many CCWA Board Members are on municipal bodies, such as planning commissions, EACs, and open space commissions, and are seen by municipal officials as trustworthy resources.

The CCWCP was funded by two state grants: Rivers Conservation Grant and a Growing Greener Grant. Key recommendations have been integrated into municipal land use and stormwater ordinances.

CCWA provides educational resources and opportunities, and outreach to property owners.

- Section 301 of the Durham Township zoning ordinance (2015) defines five districts and three overlay districts that divide up the township, one of which is the Resource Protection District or RP. The purpose of the RP is defined in Section 304 as: “To protect areas of natural features such as mature forest, steep slopes, scenic

areas, wetlands, streams, floodplains and ponds including those identified in the latest version of the Bucks County Natural Resources Plan.”

- Springfield Township’s zoning code has a Watershed District defined in section 304.B as: “To protect key portions of the Cooks Creek watershed that greatly affect the water quality of the water supply of many Township residents and businesses... to carry out the Cooks Creek Watershed Conservation Plan.”
- Section 508 of Durham Township zoning ordinance contains Environmental Protection Standards that provide strong protection of natural resources. The ordinance defines a percentage of natural resource protection for each zoning district.
- The Springfield Township 2009 stormwater management ordinance requires a stormwater plan for all projects that propose the addition of more than 1,000 square feet of impervious cover to residential properties. This is a very proactive approach to minimize the impacts of land disturbance and stormwater runoff on water resources, as most municipal stormwater management ordinances only require stormwater plans when an area of more than 5,000 square feet is disturbed.

Another important contributing factor to the successful protection of the Cooks Creek Watershed is education. The close working relationship between the watershed association and the municipalities has been instrumental in educating landowners on the importance of stewardship to support stream health. The townships look to this group to provide education to residents that helps gain support for municipal programs and regulations to protect water quality. “Everyone needs to be educated including homeowners on stream buffers’ importance for water quality and habitat for wildlife,” states a member of the Durham Township Planning Commission and the Cooks Creek Watershed Association.

Efforts to preserve important lands in Durham and Springfield townships have been very successful, with preserved land in Durham Township doubling over the past 10 years. Many of the old farm homesteads adjacent to Cooks Creek in Durham Township have conservation easements held by the township, the Heritage Conservancy, or the Wildlands Conservancy.

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