



Battlefields Part of Drinking Water Protection Effort

Groups in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle are using the conservation of farmland and Civil War battlefields to protect drinking water.

By Associated Press, Wire Service Content July 21, 2019, at 9:00 a.m.
U.S. News & World Report
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BY LIZ MCCORMICK, WEST Virginia Public Broadcasting

SHEPHERDSTOWN, W.Va. (AP) — After the 2014 Elk River chemical spill in the Kanawha Valley, the West Virginia Rivers Coalition created the Safe Water WV initiative. The idea is simple: to strengthen a community's connection to their drinking water and encourage them to work together to better protect it.

A couple years ago, Jefferson and Berkeley Counties decided to build off that initiative in a unique way — using the conservation of farmland and Civil War battlefields as a model for drinking water protection.

About two miles from the heart of Shepherdstown is the site of the bloodiest battle in West Virginia during the American Civil War. More than 600 Union and Confederate soldiers died in a two-day battle in September 1862.

The Battle of Shepherdstown may have been small in comparison to other battles of the Civil War, but historians agree, the battle not only halted the Confederates' northern invasion, but it also opened the door for President Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation.

Since 2011, the site of the Battle of Shepherdstown has been a protected historic landmark. The battle site also happens to be at a unique location — along the Potomac River. The Potomac provides drinking water to Shepherdstown residents, and other nearby areas.

"The Landmarks Commission owns about a half-mile of the Potomac River frontage," Martin Burke said.

Burke is the chairman of the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission — the group responsible for protecting the site of the Battle of Shepherdstown.

"Controlling the runoff, planting trees, all helps improve water quality."

That's why his group, along with the Jefferson County Farmland Protection Board, the Berkeley County Farmland Protection Board, and the West Virginia Rivers Coalition decided two years ago to work

together. They started an initiative called the Safe Water Conservation Collaborative in the Eastern Panhandle.

"We formed the Safe Water Conservation Collaborative to bring together, for the very first time, water utilities, land conservation organizations, and watershed groups to take a collaborative approach to protecting drinking water using the conservation of land, and protecting land forever, to protect our drinking water sources," Tanner Haid said.

Haid is the Eastern Panhandle Field Coordinator for the West Virginia Rivers Coalition.

The initiative focuses on using land conservation easements to protect drinking water. A conservation easement is a voluntary private or government contract with a landowner to protect land for ecological reasons — to improve water quality, maintain a historic site, or protect wildlife.

Haid said this approach makes drinking water protections stronger, because land conservation easements help to prevent potential contamination threats or development that could impact a source water intake.

In Jefferson County alone, there are more than 16,000 acres of battlefield land that have been identified, according to the Jefferson County Historic Landmarks Commission. Only 861 acres of that is currently protected.

Liz Wheeler is the Director of the Jefferson County Farmland Protection Board. Her organization administers conservation easements to protect historic farmland and battlefields in Jefferson County.

"When we protect land, we're not just protecting cropland. We're protecting woodland, we're protecting streams, we're protecting historic resources, so it fits into what we do; to be able to contribute to source water protection," Wheeler said.

But the Safe Water Conservation Collaborative in the Eastern Panhandle doesn't come without its challenges. Finding enough money to protect the land can be the biggest challenge, but so can educating landowners about their options if they qualify for a conservation easement or historic status.

Haid said, in the coming year, he and his team hope to identify and prioritize areas of land in the Eastern Panhandle not currently protected that are close to drinking water areas.

"And then in particular, closest to the water intake or the utilities who draw up the water, because those are the areas most threatened by development and actions that we take on our land that has an impact on our water quality," Haid said.

Jefferson and Berkeley Counties are among the most successful in the state for land conservation, according to West Virginia Rivers. Together, these counties have protected more than 10,000 acres of land.

West Virginia Rivers said, so far, they haven't collected data on how water quality has improved through the Safe Water Conservation Collaborative in the Eastern Panhandle, but over the past two years, they have signed up 30 partner organizations interested in the project.

The group hopes this model — to protect water by conserving land — isn't just for the Eastern Panhandle but could be used across the state.