

## **OCCA's 2009 budget will support many programs throughout Otsego County**

The Otsego County Conservation Association will be spending more than \$200,000 to deliver its environmental programming countywide in 2009. According to the organization's executive director, Erik Miller, OCCA programs cover a broad spectrum, both geographically and thematically.

"The diversity of our programs reiterates the critical importance of unrestricted contributions to our 2009 annual fund," Miller said. "We've just completed a very successful Otsego Lake funding campaign, but we have many initiatives on our plate besides these lake programs, which are, of course, significant."

One of OCCA's new, countywide programs is public outreach to garner participation in the "Low Carbon Diet," an initiative based on practical guidelines devised by David Gershon of The Empowerment Institute in Woodstock. The program aims at reducing an individual's carbon footprint -- the impact human activities have on the environment in terms of the amount of greenhouse gases produced and measured in units of carbon dioxide.

Much of OCCA's time will be spent on education and planning in response to the many environmental threats countywide. One such example is the extensive horizontal drilling for natural gas currently proposed for the area. OCCA is already maintaining a map of properties for which leases have been signed with gas companies, and it will continue to give input to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation on this subject. It will also, to the extent possible, work with communities to set parameters for land-use regulations that might be applied to drilling.

For all lakes in the county, OCCA will be providing general education on its website, as well as creating informational fliers on aquatic invasive species. OCCA will be working with the Canadarago Lake Improvement Association specifically to assist in the creation of a lake management plan and will continue working with the Goodyear Lake Association on a three-year program to eradicate the water chestnut, an ecologically harmful invasive plant, from that lake. OCCA has received grants from the state DEC as well as from BoatU.S. Foundation to help cover the costs of aquatic invasive species prevention and elimination programs.

Bolstered by a successful Otsego Lake fundraising campaign, OCCA will continue important programs to implement the lake's septic system management plan and continue boat inspections for invasive species. It will also continue working with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to carry out water quality improvement projects on Otsego Lake watershed farms. To date, more than 40 such projects have been completed. These projects leveraged approximately \$1.2 million in state and federal funding.

"We have also allocated monies to purchase trees and have them planted along creeks and tributaries of the Upper Susquehanna watershed. This kind of initiative is highly touted by natural resource professionals because of its multiple benefits," Miller said.

According to Miller, those benefits include not only water quality improvement but also bank stabilization, erosion abatement, enhancement of plant and wildlife, and augmented property values.

OCCA will also give significant support to SUNY-Oneonta's Biological Field Station, providing funding to support two interns who will monitor Otsego Lake's water quality and a visiting researcher who will share their findings with the community through public presentations.

"OCCA is especially grateful to the Bruce Hall Corporation in Cooperstown for funding the interns at the field station," Miller said.

"OCCA has provided continuous funding of field station programs for many years," said Bill Harman, director of the SUNY-Oneonta Biological Field Station. "This partnership allows us to do research upon which OCCA in turn bases its action-oriented programs."

Funds will be going to both Hartwick College and the field station for monitoring of the Susquehanna River to establish baseline data to assess regional water quality, and funds have likewise been set aside to assemble a protocol for water testing in the Upper Susquehanna River to ascertain any levels of toxic chemicals such as pesticides or herbicides.

"Besides the programs we've allocated funds for, there are many others that our staff and volunteers work on a zero-funding basis," Miller said. These programs include creating a walking trail along the Susquehanna River and education on light pollution, recycling, composting, and the harmful effects of outdoor burning.

OCCA publishes and distributes an area trails and canoeing guide, "Otsego Walks and Paddles" and organizes seasonal nature walks for area residents at no cost. The organization also recruits essential volunteers for Otsego County's annual household hazardous waste collection day, and participates in both the annual Earth Festival and Otsego Lake Festival.

"We are a relatively small organization, staff wise, but a growing organization in terms of membership and programs," Miller said.

OCCA currently has 500 members.