

# Pocomoke Floodplain Restoration

## Freeing a Trapped River



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### 75 Years of Channelization

Pocomoke is an Algonquin word meaning “black water.” The heavy vegetation along the river’s swampy banks decomposes as organic matter into the river, coloring the water an inky black. The river was a key trading route for Native Americans for at least 300 years before English settlers arrived. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the river was dredged and channelized, and its banks clear-cut of timber, with the objective of eliminating the flooding of farmland that had been established within the river’s watershed. What wasn’t understood at the time was the important role that the river’s natural flooding cycles play in the health of the surrounding cypress swamp, which is home to a biodiverse ecosystem. Recent scientific studies led by The Nature Conservancy and the US Geological Survey revealed that a restored Pocomoke floodplain would have a significant additional benefit — water that flows through the river’s swampy floodplain is naturally filtered, removing nutrients and sediment from upstream agricultural runoff, before flowing downstream into the Chesapeake Bay.

### Freeing a Trapped River

In 2012, The Nature Conservancy and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources joined the Pocomoke floodplain restoration effort being led by the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service. The restoration of the Pocomoke floodplain is one of the largest ecological restoration efforts in Maryland’s history. Collaboration between the Conservancy and the state and federal partners includes ongoing outreach, relationship-building with landowners, engineering design, construction and monitoring for effectiveness. The scale of the project is massive – encompassing roughly 4,000 acres along nine

### Key Accomplishments\*:

**1,193** acres of **public lands** restored

**839** acres of **private lands** restored

**552** acres of private lands **planned for future restoration**

\*Results reported as of May 2017



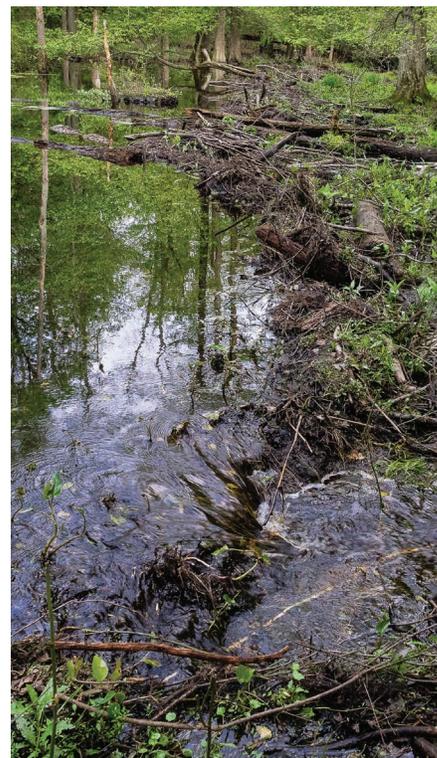
miles of the river. The restoration itself is focused on a narrow band of dirt (4' to 12' high artificial levy) piled along both sides of the river, from the historical dredging operation. The natural flooding cycles are significantly altered by the levy. The main goal of this project is to restore the natural flooding cycle in this river system. The outcomes will be cleaner water and better habitat for wildlife. To restore the river, heavy equipment was brought in to carve breaches, some up to 100' in length, through the dirt piles, reconnecting the river to its floodplain swamp. When the project is completed the number of breaches will exceed 100. Different methods of stabilizing the breaches are being tested, including the planting of native vegetation. As the restoration partners work to engage more landowners in the ongoing effort, there is one partner whose job is just getting started: nature itself will eventually take over.

## The Pocomoke River and the Chesapeake Bay

The 73-mile-long Pocomoke River is the easternmost river that flows into the Chesapeake Bay, draining water from four counties in three states. The Pocomoke River's headwaters form the Great Cypress Swamp in Sussex County, Delaware, where the northernmost stands of bald cypress trees in the United States can be found. From there, the river flows south into Maryland, and then Virginia where it empties into the Pocomoke Sound, and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay. The Pocomoke River and broad forested floodplain provide excellent habitat for migrating and nesting birds of all kinds, including waterfowl such as the Wood Duck, and songbirds such as the Prothonotary Warbler. The swampy forests are home to numerous frogs, toads, salamanders, and mammals large and small. The Pocomoke River, while altered, is home to numerous species of resident and migratory fish including herring and shad. As the Pocomoke resumes more and more of its natural functions, the river and its reconnected wetlands will become even stronger workhorses for wildlife and people living in these states and communities — creating new habitat, storing water during floods and cleaning waters that flow into the Bay.

## Our Partners

The Nature Conservancy recognizes the importance of the contributions of all partners in this massive restoration effort — the Natural Resources Conservation Service for creating the vision to restore this area, project planning and design, and for providing funding options for landowners; local landowners themselves; the US Fish and Wildlife Service for project design and restoration management; the US Geological Survey for monitoring water quality benefits; the Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the France-Merrick Foundation for project funding; and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for leveraging the great work of this project to support targeted restoration in other areas of the Chesapeake Bay.



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