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Governor DeWine Meets Branagan, the Eastern Hellbender



CLOSER LOOK — Gov. Mike DeWine makes sure he gets a good look at Branagan, the Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District's hellbender, during a presentation in Marietta.

STEUBENVILLE — When the governor asks, you do it.

So says Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District's Project Manager Aaron Dodds, who reports Gov. Mike DeWine asked them to bring Branagan, their hellbender/office mascot, to Marietta where he was making a major announcement concerning his H2Ohio initiative.

H2Ohio is aimed at preserving and protecting the health of Ohio's rivers as well as the land and wildlife habitats along them by cleaning up polluted water ways, strategically removing dams and restoring rivers. The goal is to create wetlands, reduce phosphorous runoff and give Ohioans access to clean drinking water and quality sewer systems.

Up to now H2Ohio had been focused on correcting the algae problem on Lake Erie, but the administration now is planning to expand it to cover the entire state.

The initiative is focused on expanding the survey of contaminants in Ohio's rivers, as well as monitoring the fish and mussel populations, cleaning and restoring Ohio's riverways and preserving the land along the edges of rivers and wetlands to help maintain healthy waterways, in part by removing dams to help restore wildlife habitats.

Dodds said the governor chose Marietta for the announcement because of its river front and the hellbender as the poster child for the program, since it's an indicator of healthy rivers.

"He wanted our hellbender down there," Dodds said. *"I ended up taking him and some of the displays down."*

The Eastern Hellbender, on the state's endangered list, is the largest salamander found within the United States, and Jefferson County is home to the largest population of them. A tiny population was found in the watershed in 2009, but since then they've also been found in Cross Creek, Little Beaver Creek in Columbiana, and Captina Creek in Belmont County.

Every September, eggs discovered in the waters of Yellow Creek and Cross Creek are taken to the Columbus and Toledo zoos, both part of the Hellbender Partnership, where they're raised for three years and then released back into the wild. Most of the eggs collected as part of the program are from Jefferson County, and any work done adjacent to the hellbender habitats is monitored, which ultimately benefits other wildlife as well.

Since 2016, hellbenders have directly related to more than \$1.2 million in investments into Jefferson County through construction of bridges, stream stabilization and land preservation — including the Cedar Lick Bridge in Wayne Township, \$133,000; Toronto Band Camp, \$148,500; Riparian plantings in Yellow Creek and Cross Creek, \$7,500, as well as JSWCD's Quaker Ridge property in Salem Township, a nearly 100-acre parcel that will showcase stream restoration, a wildflower/pollinator habitat, outdoor classrooms and trails.

JSWCD also has been raising Branagan, the hellbender that made the trip to Marietta, since Aug. 24, 2017.

"When the governor saw him, he was kind of star of the show," Dodds said. "When the governor got there, the first thing he said was, 'Where's the hellbender?' He came around and looked at it and asked some questions. I talked with him; he had a chance to ask some questions."

Dodds said a picture of Lincoln's bridge was part of the display he took, and the governor *"actually brought it up, asked about it. I could tell he'd read some of the literature he got about the project that I'd given him last summer, he knew details."*

As President Lincoln was traveling to Washington, D.C., for his inauguration, Dodds said a large storm came through the area, dislodging a large sycamore tree that crashed into and compromised a wooden train trestle. When Lincoln's train reached the trestle, fearing the bridge wouldn't support the weight of it, he was asked to walk across. He obliged, but as he crossed the trestle he slipped on the wet, greasy wood and nearly plunged to his death.

One of his first acts as president was to have a stone bridge built to replace the wood trestle in the name of national defense.

That bridge, located at the hellbender preserve, is still standing, and Dodds said with *“some love and attention it can be a great monument to the people of the county and the state.”*

“He was really interested in that bridge,” said Dodds, who sees the governor’s interest as encouraging since the hellbender preserve is a major component of Jefferson County’s Appalachian Community Grant application — another DeWine-initiated program aimed at helping Ohio’s 32 Appalachian communities plan and design projects that could *“bring about transformational change and be a catalyst for future development.”*

“He didn’t make any promises, because ultimately it’s in Ohio Department of Development’s hands, but as part of the H2Ohio initiative, several of the projects included in the grants and what soil and water are doing dovetailed together, so there’s a good opportunity to get funding as long as we keep progress rolling,” Dodds said.

Dodds said there are a lot of synergies among H2Ohio, the Appalachian Community Grant programs and what locals are trying to do in Jefferson County.

“(And) there’s a lot of money available,” Dodds said. “With projects like the Morgan’s Raid battlefield, where we’re going to remove a low-head dam to help restore the battlefield area and benefit the water shed, it creates better opportunities where we can work on Appalachian Community Grant and H2Ohio grants in unison.

“I think it helps improve our chances, not only for an Appalachian Community Grant but also getting state dollars invested in communities and helping improve our quality of life and restore our natural and historic resources, our identity,” he added.

Dodds admits he “*exploited*” the opportunity to tell the governor about Jefferson County’s hellbenders and watersheds, how we can utilize beavers to restore the wetlands and our pollinator trail, which is part of the Appalachian Community Grant.

“The hellbender preserve, dam removal at the Morgan’s Raid battlefield and pollinator trail, which restore native areas, it all earmarks into a lot of the state’s initiatives,” he said. *“I think the best part, too, was that the governor didn’t need prompting to know the Jefferson County story. When he saw the hellbender and the picture of the bridge, he already knew our story.”*

Dodds described Branagan’s first road trip as a bit of an ordeal: He said they had to take tubs with water in them from his aquarium and from the stream, and rig the car with airstones to keep the oxygen flow into the water, because hellbenders need a lot of oxygen.

“We had to move the water, we had to move the stone, and we had to move the aquarium,” he said. *“It was our first time having him out of the office. He did fairly well, largely because he had a really big meal in the morning and was still digesting, so he wasn’t freaking out. But he was happy to be home (again), I could tell that.”*

But, he said, *“it turned out to be a very good decision. We were able to get a lot accomplished, a lot of good conversation that I think will benefit Jefferson County, benefit hellbenders in Jefferson County in a big way.”*

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