

**Regional News • 3/21/01**

## **Extension program brings opposing camps to the table**

*By Don Hendershot*

Imagine you're at a table with a tree hugger, a granola, a hunter, a fisherman, a retiree with a half-million dollar lake house, a developer, a county commissioner, a biologist, a birder and an outfitter. Now imagine it's your job to get this crowd to agree on a critical land-use or environmental issue that affects each and every one.

Believe it or not, people are volunteering for the position as arbitrator for these diverse interest groups.

The Natural Resources Leadership Institute (NRLI) is a program of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service and North Carolina State University. NRLI's mission is to create leaders and support a diverse group of citizens who are committed to building consensus on issues affecting the quality of the environment.

The NRLI (affectionately called "narly" by participants) curriculum consists of six 18-hour workshops and then a year-long practicum. The workshops are facilitated by N.C. State faculty, natural resource professionals, dispute mediation practitioners and staff from other universities.

The practicum is designed to address actual natural resource issues in a community. NRLI participants draw on their classroom training to help create consensus recommendations which will affect environmental decisions at the organizational, community, state or national level.

One ongoing NRLI project and another one recently completed will affect Western North Carolina. Presently, the Tuckasegee River Cooperative

Stakeholder Team, facilitated by Steve Reed, is working on issues which will have an impact on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) relicensing of the Duke Power hydroelectric plants along the Tuckasegee River.

Reed, environmental planner for North Carolina Division of Water Quality, said that the NRLI project was a "good fit" for him. Reed has been working on water quality issues across the state since the 1980s.

He said his desire to work to improve the quality of natural resources across the state led him to enroll in the NRLI curriculum. Reed has been involved in many regulatory decisions, and he said that the best results are always those obtained through local collaboration.

Following NRLI guidelines, Reed brought together a diverse group of stakeholders to discuss the relicensing issue. Members include local governmental officials, Duke Power representatives, N.C. Wildlife Resources officials, private boaters, Friends of Lake Glenville and many other interested stakeholders.

The stakeholder team plans to develop a set of consensus recommendations which will provide enhancement of the Tuckasegee River, its tributaries, Duke Power reservoirs, and the related natural resources of the basin. Even though Reed's practicum will be finished before the relicensing, the group has committed to remaining intact until the process is finished. Reed has also agreed to continue as facilitator.

Two other NRLI participants are co-facilitators of the Tuckasegee group. They are Don Rayno, community planner for N.C. Division of Water Resources, and Michelle Suverkrubbe, senior planner for the town of Cary.

Mary Lou Addor, assistant director at NRLI, said that the institute began in 1995. Over 160 participants have entered NRLI's leadership development program. She said that NRLI participants have worked on environmental issues across the country and that NRLI graduates were often asked to participate as consultants or facilitators on natural resource issues.

According to Addor, some of the disputes NRLI participants have

collaborated on include a dispute between cotton farmers and the Environmental Protection Agency in Cameron City, Texas; the Neuse River Buffer Rules governing riparian boundaries; the North Carolina Wood Chip Production Study; and the Bluff Mountain Working Group to reach agreements on recommendations to the N.C. Forest supervisor regarding timber sales on Bluff Mountain.

Forest Westall, the regional water quality supervisor at the state Division of Water Quality, just finished his NRLI practicum. He brought together a Cullasaja stakeholders group to work on recommendations for the new Basinwide Plan for the Little Tennessee River Basin.

Westall said he expects to see some of the recommendations in the new plan. He said that NRLI was the best program he had participated in during his 25 years with the state.

“These kinds of dialogues need to be going on all over Western North Carolina. We’re becoming something no one planned on,” Westall said.

Peg Jones, president of Save Our Rivers and a Macon County resident, said the NRLI program was an eye-opener for her. She participated on the Cullasaja stakeholders team which Westall facilitated. Jones, a long-time environmental activist, said that before the NRLI project she had thought of Westall as the “enemy.” After working with him for a year, she has a decidedly different opinion.

She praised Westall as a facilitator and feels that the collaborative process is a wonderful tool. “This is the right way to go,” Jones said.

Ron McKittrick of FERC said that the collaborative process was more than merely an educational exercise. He told the Tuckasegee stakeholders that issues they could build consensus on would not only help expedite the relicensing project, but they would also be more likely to be part of the final agreement.

Bunny Johns, who lives in Wesser and is a recreational consultant for Duke Power, said that she heard about the NRLI program when Reed called her about the Tuckasegee project. Johns first became a member of the

stakeholders group then signed up for the NRLI curriculum.

Johns said that after 27 years in the area she began noticing that some of the natural resources she revered and felt should be maintained weren't being maintained. She also noted that when these issues came up for public discussion, the debates were often contentious and drawn out, and often no final settlement was reached. She said she enrolled in hopes of becoming a more effective stakeholder.

If you have the urge to get "narly" about natural resources visit the NRLI website at [www.ces.ncsu.edu/PIE/nrli](http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/PIE/nrli) or call Addor at 919.515.9602.

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#)

© Copyright 2001, The Smoky Mountain News.