



Raritan Headwaters Association

ANNUAL REPORT 2023



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*Cover photo:
Green heron mirror image,
photo by Dallas Hetherington*

For Raritan Headwaters, 2023 was a year to prepare for organizational changes that would secure our role as a leader in safeguarding New Jersey's clean water.

Letter from the Executive Director

Our natural resources continue to be impacted by intense storms, invasive species, poorly planned development, and emerging contaminants that threaten the health of surface and ground water. RHA's response has been to enhance our expertise and bring fresh energy and a renewed focus on growing programs and projects to counter these threats.

Over the year, we fostered deep appreciation for the natural world through environmental education programs for over 6,000 youths. We reduced pollution and microplastics by organizing volunteers to remove 15 tons of trash from 50 sites along the North and South Branches, and their tributaries. We trained new citizen scientists to collect and analyze vital water quality data to inform our conservation practices and public outreach. We achieved stronger protections for local waterways through collaboration and advocacy aimed at state and local policymaking. We restored and improved critical wildlife habitats with partners and preserved key watershed lands.

Today, we are building on our conservation legacy by increasing program participation, embracing innovation, and forging relationships as the go-to partner on new initiatives.

Our ambitious agenda features new stream restoration projects, including five dam removals along the South Branch that will enhance fish passage, water quality, and recreation. We are watchdogging the cleanup of contaminated sites and bolstering our well testing program to address residents' concerns about the safety of their drinking water. We have expanded our work on developing watershed management plans that prioritize conservation and stormwater control, while laying the groundwork for "Wild and Scenic" designation for key rivers. And this is only a fraction of what we hope to accomplish going forward!

Every day, I am inspired by the individual and collective actions of our exceptional staff, board, dedicated volunteers, and generous supporters – standing by us to ensure clean, safe water for all. Your unwavering support sustains us and fuels our commitment to careful stewardship of our rivers, wildlife, drinking water and the quality of life we treasure in our beautiful watershed.

Onward!

Mara Tippet,
Executive Director



Our vision is that everyone within our reach has access to safe, clean water that is swimmable, fishable, and above all, drinkable.

A Leadership Transition

Cindy Ehrenclou, who had served as RHA's executive director for 17 years and a member of the staff for three decades, stepped down on December 31, 2023. Mara Tippett, a senior member of the RHA staff since 2016 took the helm on January 1, 2024.

A thoughtful, deliberate process took place over a year, led by Board President, Dallas Hetherington and a committee of trustees whose goal was a smooth leadership transition that ensured long-term stability. Cindy was a respected conservation advocate that had guided RHA through pivotal moments including the 2011 merger of the South Branch and Upper Raritan Watershed Associations. She has remained to serve as Senior Development Director, spearheading fundraising efforts to help us reach our goals.

Mara served as a watershed scientist responsible for managing and growing the Well Testing Program and more recently leading RHA's Land Preservation work. She holds a master's degree in environmental science and policy from Johns Hopkins University. Mara is a leader within New Jersey's conservation community and well respected by our board and staff. RHA is in good hands!



Mara Tippett, Cindy Ehrenclou and Dallas Hetherington

RHA gets a new South Branch Home



June 2023, Raritan Headwaters moved its South Branch office to Darts Mill, Flemington



South Branch Raritan River at Darts Mill

2023 Well Test Results

RHA conducted 6,000 well tests across 35 municipalities.

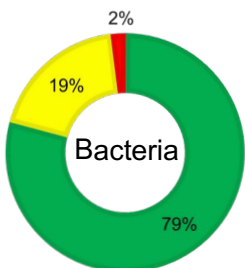
Working closely with a state-certified lab we offered a menu of available well tests guided by the NJ Private Well Testing Act. Results are compared against federal and state exposure limits. While keeping results confidential, we are a valuable community resource for private residents concerned about the health of their drinking water.

Reacting to the EPA's finalization of a more stringent national drinking water regulation for PFAS, we expanded our test offerings. PFAS, nicknamed "forever chemicals" can cause serious health risks because they don't break down in the body or environment. Used extensively in consumer products like Teflon and Gore-Tex, the US began to phase out production and use in 2002. However, new types of PFAS continue to be created by the chemical industry. Rising concerns about PFAS in water supplies, coupled with RHA's 2023 detection rate of 65%, make testing critical for private well owners.

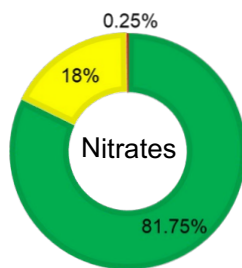
Well Test Program Manager Samantha LaRocca coordinates Community Well Test events hosted in partnership with municipalities and offers testing year-round through the Flemington and Bedminster offices.



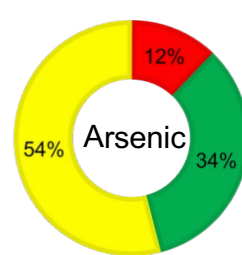
WELL TESTING REPORT 2023



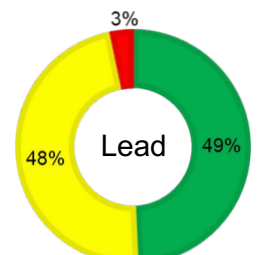
- Coliform bacteria not detected
- Coliform bacteria present, E. coli undetected
- E. coli present



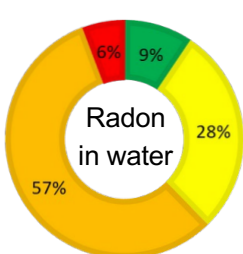
- Nitrates under 4 mg/L
- Detected 4-10 mg/L
- Nitrate failure-- over MCL of 10 mg/L



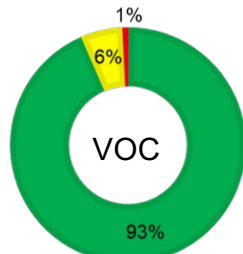
- Arsenic not detected
- Detected under MCL of 5 ppb
- Arsenic failure -- over 5 ppb



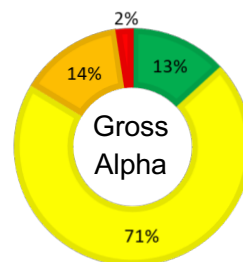
- Lead not detected
- Lead detected under 15 ppb
- Lead failure -- over MCL of 15 ppb



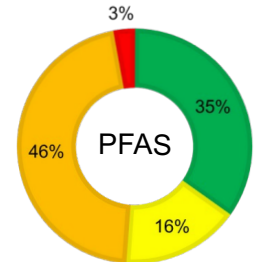
- Radon not detected
- Radon detected under 800 pCi/L
- Radon Detected 800-4000 pCi/L
- Radon Detected over MCL of 4000 pCi/L



- VOCs not detected
- Detected under MCL
- Detected over MCL



- Gross Alpha Undetected
- Gross Alpha Detected under 5 pCi/L
- Gross Alpha Detected 5-15 pCi/L
- Gross Alpha Over MCL of 15 pCi/L



- PFAS not detected
- 1 PFAS detected
- 2 PFAS detected
- 3 PFAS detected

2023 Watershed Report Card

The Upper Raritan River watershed is known for its scenic wooded hills, rolling farmland and historic villages. But picture-perfect settings don't guarantee pristine water in our rivers and streams.

Our waterways are impacted by contamination from many sources, including fertilizers and pesticides, road salt, failing septic systems, animal waste, and dangerous chemicals from leaking underground tanks and toxic industrial sites. In addition, decades of development have reduced forested stream buffers that help keep streams cool and slow stormwater runoff. For these reasons, our region's waterways received an overall grade of C on our annual "Watershed Report Card".

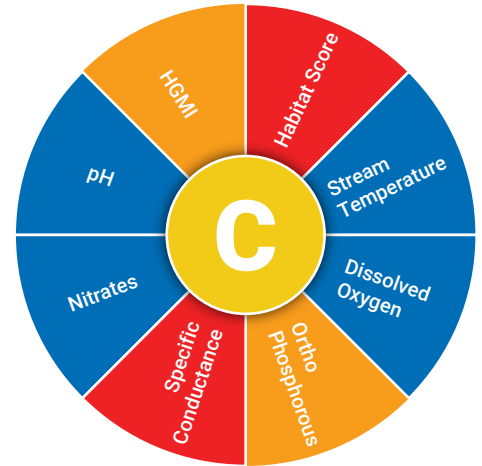
Clearly, more must be done to raise the grade! It's essential —not only for the millions of New Jersey residents who rely on the drinking water we protect but also for the entire Raritan River ecosystem. We're aiming for an A+!

The C average is based on stream quality measurements taken by RHA staff and trained volunteer citizen scientists at 72 sites throughout the 470-square-mile watershed. For grading purposes, the region is broken into 52 sub-watersheds, which differed dramatically in stream quality. Those with failing or subpar grades may lack healthy aquatic habitats, or have degraded stream banks, insufficient vegetation, and limited diversity of aquatic life.

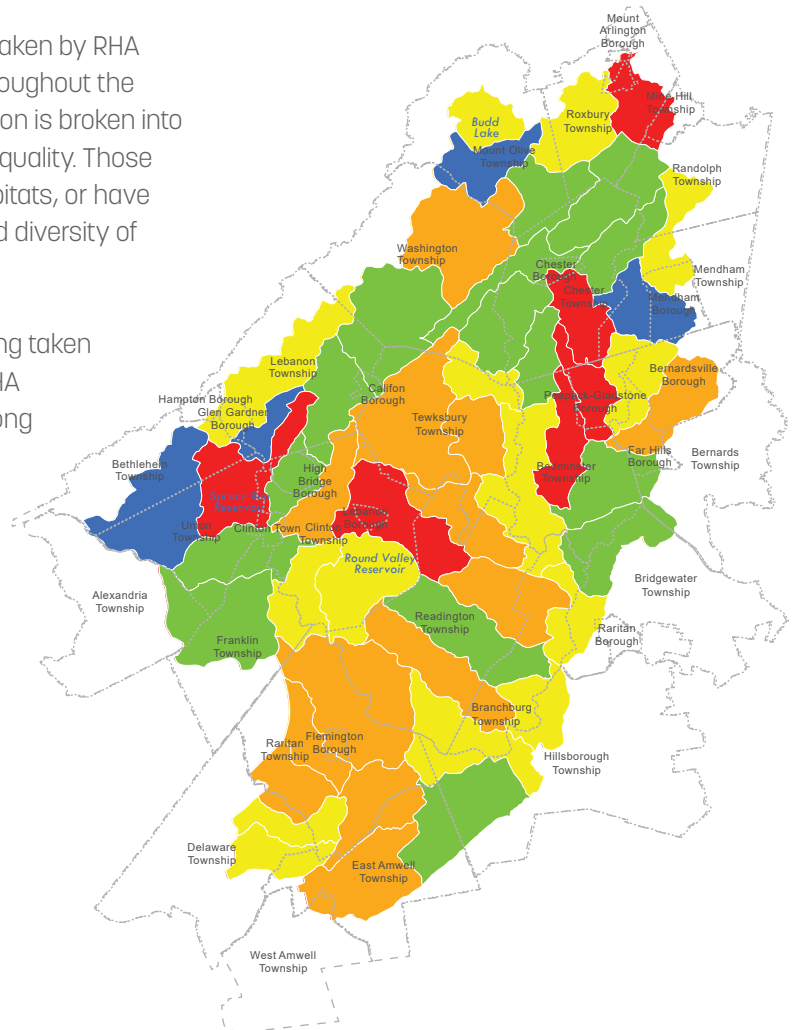
Fortunately, solutions are available! One action already being taken is planting trees along streams lacking forested buffers. RHA received a Superfund grant to plant 10,000 native trees along the North and South branches. These saplings will grow up to reduce unhealthy temperatures and defend our waterways from polluted runoff.

Residents can help by reducing the amount of chemicals they use on their properties, landscaping with native plants, maintaining septic systems and encouraging their town to use less road salt.

To view the 2023 Report Card, go to raritanheadwaters.org/watershed-report-card-2023



Raritan Headwaters health scale



“At RHA, we believe that empowering young people with the knowledge and skills to address climate change and other environmental threats is the only way to ensure a sustainable future.”

Generous grants from the Royal Bank of Canada and American Water Charitable Foundation funded our exciting new Environmental Leaders Academy. This yearlong program provides high school students of diverse backgrounds and socio-economic statuses with a full scholarship to explore future study and careers in the environmental field.

Through experiential learning, students participate in hands-on activities, learn from environmental experts and examine topics related to climate change, environmental justice, biodiversity, sustainability, resource protection, and more. This new initiative includes a 5-day overnight summer camp on the Pingry School campus in Pottersville, a 12-month one-on-one mentoring relationship, and a day long planned group activity scheduled 4 times throughout the year.



Land Preservation – Protecting our Rivers

Led by Raritan Headwaters, 16 acres along the South Branch were permanently preserved by nonprofit conservation partners, as well as local, county, and state governments.

RHA, New Jersey Conservation Foundation and Hunterdon Land Trust acquired 12 acres in Readington Township and 4 in Raritan Township - utilizing NJ state Green Acres funding, matched by Hunterdon County Open Space Trust funds. In addition, Readington and Raritan townships contributed their municipal open space funds.

Sole ownership was transferred to Readington Township with the ultimate goal to merge the preserved land with the South Branch Wildlife Management Area. This important effort contributes to the overall health of the South Branch and plays a pivotal role in the river ecosystem, nurturing species like bald eagles, ospreys, waterfowl, wading birds, songbirds, and vital fisheries resources.

Watershed Planning

Funded by a NJDEP grant and led by RHA's Dr. Kristi MacDonald and Tracy Gordon, we worked over two years with our partners, Rutgers Cooperative Extension Water Resources Program and Mount Olive Township to develop a “Budd Lake Watershed Restoration and Protection Plan”.

Budd Lake is New Jersey's largest naturally-formed lake at the headwaters of the South Branch. In the mid-1800's the lake became a favorite summertime playground but today, its water quality is degraded by pollutants washed into the lake by stormwater runoff.

Last winter the NJDEP approved the final plan that will serve as a blueprint to improve conditions in the lake, making it less prone to Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs) and a much cleaner place for fishing, boating and swimming.

Our success at Budd Lake opened the door to more watershed planning in the Highlands region of our watershed. The NJ Highlands Council is funding a grant for Rutgers and RHA to partner in the preparation of management plans that identify strategies for stormwater management including green infrastructure projects such as rain gardens and bioswales.

Happenings in our Watershed



Shedfest Music Festival – Food trucks, kid’s activities, great bands and lots of fun!



Over 1,100 volunteers removed 15 tons of trash from 50 stream sites at our **2023 Annual Stream Cleanup**.



This year we partnered with **27 schools**. Our education team worked in classrooms and welcomed hundreds of students to Fairview Farm for outdoor lessons in nature.



We participated in the **“Milkweed for Monarchs”** project, planted hundreds of milkweed plants on Fairview Farm and now our preserve is certified as a Monarch Waystation.



Kestrel banding – Our Kestrel Nest Box program is taking off! Supporting recovery of this threatened falcon encourages landowners to protect wildlife and water supplies by using fewer chemicals on the land.



Robert Lucas, Stream Restoration Coordinator is digging in to meet our grant-funded goal to plant **10,000 trees** along the banks of the North and South Branches.

Our Volunteers Make a Difference

The reality is - we could not accomplish all we do without support received from the hundreds of volunteers that pitch in to support each of our conservation programs.

2023 Annual Volunteer Award Recipients

Ted Lurker - Suki Dewey Volunteer of the Year for his tireless work to support our science and stewardship projects.

Ron Bubnowski and Bernardsville Troop 150 - Stewardship Excellence Award for multiple projects to enhance the visitor experience on Fairview Farm.

Henry Bayard and Wendy Utberg - Waterkeeper Award for their valuable assistance in supporting a range of stream monitoring programs.

Marilynn Schneider - Community Champion Award for her willingness to pitch in wherever needed, organization-wide.

Lilah Friedman, Bernardsville High School - Sustainable Future Award for her dedication to our education programs

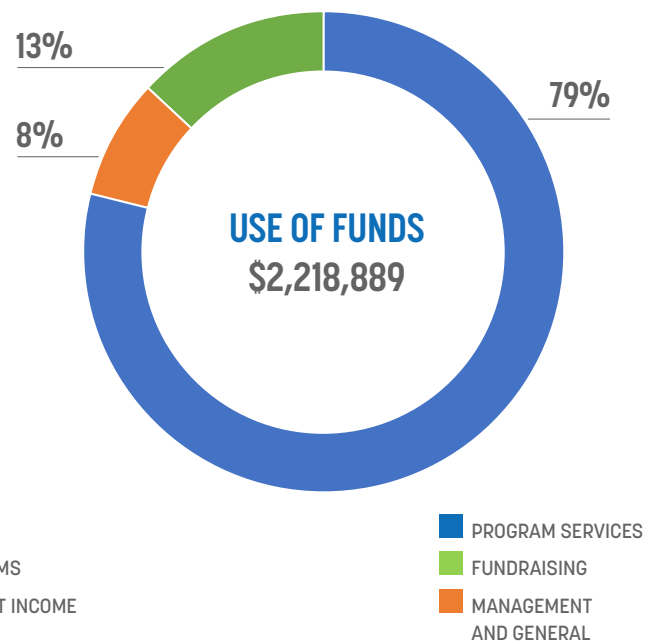
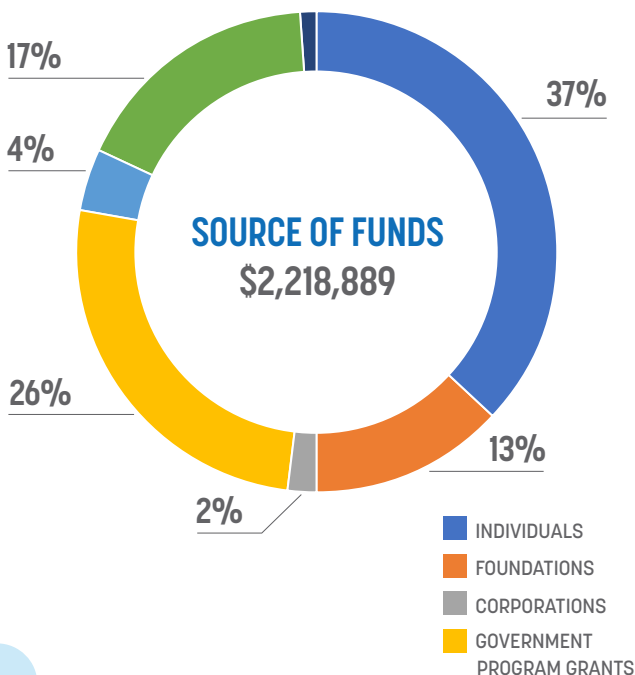
Ben Donaghy and the Structure Learning Experience Group, Ridge High School - Seeds of Change Award for their help with projects like assembling well test kits.



Ted Lurker, Volunteer of the Year working on one of our five climate stations!

Fiscal Year January 1, 2023 – December 31, 2023

Raritan Headwaters Association is a non-profit 501 (c)(3) conservation organization that operates on the calendar year, January 1 and ends on December 31. Our accounts are audited on an annual basis by the accounting firm of James M. Wood, CPA. Presented are two graphs depicting the Functional Expenses and Support Revenue of the Association for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2023.



THANK YOU TO EACH OF OUR GENEROUS DONORS

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