

Orono, Veazie eager to map vernal pools

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What is a vernal pool?

A vernal pool is a natural, temporary to semipermanent body of water that occurs in a shallow depression that typically fills with water from rain or snow melt during the spring or fall and may be dry during summer months. These pools provide optimal breeding habitat for wood frogs, spotted salamanders, blue-spotted salamanders, and fairy shrimp. In Maine, the pools provide valuable habitat for many other species of wildlife, including a number of state-listed rare, threatened, and endangered species. Avoiding impacts to pools and their surrounding habitat is important because the amphibians that breed in them return each year to the very same pool from which they hatched.

- State of Maine recognized definition

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In an effort to identify significant vernal pools within the limits of Orono and Veazie that could be subject to new regulations identified under the Maine Natural Resources Protection Act, the towns are collaborating with the University of Maine on a mapping project.

The project not only will help the towns with their individual development plans as well as landowners who are considering project on their property.

"We want to get ahead of the curve and we think landowners will want to get ahead of the curve to know if there are vernal pools that qualify as being significant so it doesn't pop up as an unpleasant surprise later on," Orono Planner Evan Richert said Tuesday.

Due to their size and seasonal nature, significant vernal pools can occur on properties without landowners knowing of their existence. This can make things difficult for landowners planning for development on their property.

To assist in the mapping effort, Aram Calhoun, a UM associate professor of wetland ecology, and graduate student Dawn Morgan will help determine whether the vernal pools are significant and subject to the new regulations.

As part of the project, landowners with vernal pools can get a free assessment of whether the pools are considered significant under the regulations.

Veazie already has aerial photography of the town, and Orono is expected to sponsor a flight for its photography this spring to get the project moving. Calhoun and Morgan then will organize and train "citizen scientists" who will work under their supervision with landowners to make field visits and assess the pools.

Funding for the aerial photography in Orono and analysis of the aerial photos to identify possible vernal pools is being paid for partly by a \$3,500 grant through the university's environmental sustainability initiative. The town will have to pay the rest.

A joint Orono-Veazie meeting for landowners and for recruited citizen scientists to let them know about the effort and how it will work is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. Thursday, April 3, at the Orono Town Council chambers.

According to the new regulations, a pool's significance is based on a minimum number of egg masses for any one of the species dependent upon these wetlands for successful reproduction, or upon the presence of state threatened or endangered species. Because of this, surveys must be done during the spring breeding season and the project is expected to take two years.

The process will consist of the following steps:

- **Photo Interpretation:** Color infrared photographs will be used for identification of wetlands that have the potential to function as vernal pools.
- **Vernal Pool Ecology, Field Identification and Assessment Training:** Citizen scientists will be trained to conduct field inventories of pools to determine their significance using techniques approved by the state Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.
- **Field Assessments:** No field assessments will be conducted without prior permission from property owners. The benefit to landowners is that, should they want to undertake a development project, they will already know if pools on their property are considered significant wildlife habitat. Pre-identification and determination of pool significance can save time and money required for obtaining necessary permits from the state Department of Environmental Protection.

This approach has been successfully tested and implemented with reliable results in towns in both Maine and Connecticut.

"It seemed like a low-cost, effective and efficient way to get this work done," Richert said.

Residents who think that they have a vernal pool on their property and would like a free assessment, or for more information may contact Dawn.Morgan@umit.maine.edu or attend Thursday's meeting.

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