



**SEBAGO CLEAN WATERS AWARDED \$8 MILLION USDA GRANT
TO PROTECT WATER QUALITY AND OTHER BENEFITS OF
SEBAGO LAKE WATERSHED FORESTS**

The grant, managed by lead partner Portland Water District, will allow the nine-member partnership to work with private landowners, municipalities, and businesses to conserve 10,000 acres of forestland and implement other watershed protection projects.

Standish, ME – September 18, 2020

Sebago Clean Waters (SCW) reached a significant milestone along its path to protect the Sebago Lake watershed this week when the coalition received an \$8 million U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant.

Portland Water District, as the lead partner for the grant, will manage the funds and work closely with other SCW partners. The five-year grant will support forest conservation, land stewardship, aquatic invasives control, stream connectivity, and landowner outreach in the Sebago Lake watershed.

SCW partners will use the grant to leverage another \$10.5 million from public and private sources needed to reach the initiative's five-year goal of protecting 10,000 acres of high-priority forestland in the region and implement other watershed protection measures.

"This extraordinary \$18.5 million combined investment from USDA and our partners gives a major boost to our efforts to protect Greater Portland's water source," said Spencer Meyer of the Highstead Foundation and co-chair of Sebago Clean Waters. "This project protects both the environment and the economy by linking the upstream landowners that steward the woods and waters and the downstream businesses and residents who rely on this pristine resource."

This major new initiative will greatly enhance SCW's ability to meet its goal of protecting 25 percent of the land in the Sebago watershed in the next 15 years. Currently, only 11 percent of the forests in the 234,000-acre watershed are conserved. These forests act as a natural filter for the water that feeds into Sebago Lake. As the drinking water

supply for more than 200,000 people in Greater Portland—Maine’s largest urban area—the lake is a unique and critical resource for the state. The increasing pace of development in the region threatens the quality of this pristine water supply.

“The first step in providing safe drinking water is to protect the water source. This grant will enable the protection of thousands of acres of forests that naturally clean Sebago Lake,” said Carrie Lewis, general manager of Portland Water District.

“We work with willing landowners who want to see their forests stay forests forever. The result is we get cleaner drinking water and help keep Maine looking like Maine,” added Paul Hunt, environmental services manager at Portland Water District.

In addition to protecting drinking water, these funds will improve aquatic habitat for wildlife, boost local and regional economic benefits through the forest products sector, and provide public health benefits through increased recreational access.

“We are in a watershed moment figuratively, and now literally, thanks to this grant and our partners at Sebago Clean Waters,” said Lee Dassler, executive director of SCW partner Western Foothills Land Trust. “Protecting our forests and waters, strengthening the forest-based economies of our region, and ensuring biological diversity in the watershed—all elements of this grant—are essential to achieving a sustainable future for our wild and human communities.”

In its first two and a half years, SCW partners have already protected nearly 2,000 acres of critical forest with the help of public and private donors, and a growing number of Portland-based business partners. As part of this new initiative, SCW is seeking additional business partners to co-invest in the sustainability of the Sebago Lake watershed.

Through RCPP, NRCS co-invests with partners to implement projects that demonstrate innovative solutions to conservation challenges and provide measurable improvements and outcomes. SCW was one of ten recipients out of 49 applicants this year for the RCPP Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA).

The AFA provision will allow SCW to work with landowners, businesses, communities, and local NRCS experts to develop innovative conservation finance approaches to protecting the watershed. These include a new landowner carbon offset program and partnering with downstream businesses that rely on clean water for high-quality products and the well-being of their employees.

“Through these projects, partners are able to take the lead and leverage the flexibilities that make RCPP so effective,” said Benjamin Naumann, assistant state conservationist for NRCS in Maine. “Partners are delivering conservation in new and innovative ways, and by working together we can harness our collective resources to produce greater results for conservation and agriculture.”

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Sebago Clean Waters is a partnership between the Portland Water District and eight local, regional, and national conservation organizations working collaboratively to protect water quality, community well-being, a vibrant economy, and fish and wildlife habitat in the Sebago region through voluntary forest conservation and stewardship.

Sebago Clean Waters partners are Loon Echo Land Trust, Western Foothills Land Trust, Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, Highstead Foundation, Lakes Environmental Association, Open Space Institute, Portland Water District, The Nature Conservancy, and The Trust for Public Land. www.sebagocleanwaters.org

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Contacts:

Karen Young, Sebago Clean Waters coordinator, 207-351-0039, kyoung@sebagocleanwaters.org.

Michelle Clements, public relations manager, Portland Water District, 207-774-5961, ext. 3050, mclements@pwd.org.

Thomas Kielbasa, public affairs specialist, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Maine, 207-745-7493, thomas.kielbasa@usda.gov.