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## ICPRB Wins \$419,300 Grant to Increase Eel Habitat in the Potomac River

*The Chesapeake WILD grant will support opening passageways in the North Branch Potomac to allow migration of the American eel, a species of environmental, cultural, and historical significance.*

**ROCKVILLE, MD** (Sept. 17, 2024) - The American eel has historically been found throughout the Potomac River. In recent centuries, dams and other hindrances have decreased access to available habitat resulting in significantly reduced population numbers. The Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin (ICPRB) recently was awarded a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense (WILD) grant to help restore the eels to their native range and make existing populations more resilient.

“The American eel is the Potomac’s only catadromous species, which means it lives its life in the river but migrates out to sea to spawn. Juvenile eel return to headwaters of the Potomac basin each year to grow up, and hopefully someday, repeat the process seaward. Unfortunately, American eel that enter the Potomac basin this year face a number of issues such as impassable dams, new predators (like the snakehead and blue catfish), and recent changes in land-use that ultimately reduce the number of young eel reaching the prime developmental upstream habitat,” states Gordon “Mike” Selckmann, associate director for aquatic habitats at ICPRB.

“Improving fish passage by cooperating with our project partners to modernize our historic dams with eel ladders is just one way we can help this historic fish,” says Selckmann.

“We are excited for the WILD grant and the opportunity to work with our partner organizations to build new infrastructure on Dam 5 near Williamsport, Maryland, as well as support renovations on additional infrastructure that will allow eels to move upstream, opening a whole new world for them,” said ICPRB Executive Director Michael Nardolilli.

According to Selckmann, some estimates suggest American eel once accounted for 20% of the freshwater biomass on the eastern seaboard, “They are an important component to riverine and terrestrial ecosystems, as both predator and prey. They even transport larval freshwater mussels upstream.” Selckmann added, “More eels may lead to more mussels and cleaner water.”

“We believe this project will not only restore habitat but also increase public awareness about this important species in the Potomac River,” Nardolilli said. In addition to an eelway at Dam 5, eel passageways are being planned for additional impediments along the river.

This project is made possible through a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation with support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, the U.S. Forest Service and Altria. Additional support was provided by the National Park Service.

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*The ICPRB is an interstate compact commission established by Congress in 1940. Its mission is to protect and enhance the waters and related resources of the Potomac River basin through science, regional cooperation, and education. Represented by appointed commissioners, the ICPRB includes the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and the federal government. The ICPRB affirms the importance of fostering diversity equity, inclusion, and justice in all activities. The Potomac belongs to all.*