



Roxanne Pandolfi photos

**LEFT:** Willington First Selectman Christina Mailhos signs the Natchaug River Basin Conservation Compact while Holly Drinkuth from the Nature Conservancy holds on at Diana's Pool in Chaplin on Friday. **ABOVE:** Eastford First Selectman Allan Platt also signs the compact, which is an agreement to tackle conservation challenges regionally.

# A pledge to keep the Natchaug clean

By **ANDREW YOUNG**  
Special to the Chronicle

CHAPLIN — Eight communities came together Friday to recognize the importance of keeping the Natchaug River clean and safe.

Doing so, representatives from the towns said, would ensure that high-quality drinking water could be provided for the 60,000 people within the region.

Mayors and selectmen from Ashford, Chaplin, Eastford, Mansfield, Union, Willington, Windham and Woodstock jointly signed the Natchaug River Basin Conservation

Compact, an agreement to tackle conservation challenges regionally.

Leaders gathered at the Chaplin Fire House Friday morning to sign the deal, which was administered by the Green Valley Institute and the Nature Conservancy, two conservation organizations dedicated to protecting area lands and waterways.

"I think this is a very important start for what can happen for communities, when they come together. After all, we are the ones who are ultimately affected by this," said Windham Mayor Ernest Eldridge. "We are the ones that put this water into our

system."

In the midst of some of the densest populations on the nation's eastern seaboard, the Fenton, Mount Hope and Natchaug rivers are nicely tucked away, remaining clean due, in large part, to the 175-square-mile expanse of green that surrounds them.

The area has been called the Last Green Valley, which is also the name of a government-funded nonprofit agency looking to protect this region and keep it clean, all the while promoting its tourism benefits.

The Natchaug River is so clean, the state  
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Department of Environmental Protection uses it as the goal for measuring healthy streams in Connecticut, according to the group.

This region is among the last remaining open spaces in Connecticut to provide opportunities for hiking, paddling and trout fishing.

Through regional cooperation, the area was designated a Connecticut Greenway in 2006, and municipal leaders have shared expertise as they plan for watershed protection and sound land-use decisions.

The compact formalizes these

communities' shared mission to ensure the health and safety of the watershed, while supporting the economic vitality of the Natchaug River Basin towns.

"Watersheds are not limited by municipal boundaries," said Gregory Padick, Mansfield's planning director. "There's a growing recognition that we have to work together to protect these natural resources that we all share. There are opportunities for all of us to learn from each other. We all have the same goal."

Proponents said this goal will be a step-by-step process and it is the objective of signing towns to identify conservation targets and

assess their condition or ecological viability.

In addition, according to the pact, members must identify and rank the primary threats affecting the overall condition of the watershed systems and define strategies to address the threats.

Finally, a document needs to be created to assign measurable actions and dates specific to each strategy to determine if their strategies are working, according to proponents.

Recognized by federal, state and local and private agencies, the Natchaug River is seen as a benchmark stream for water quality.

The purpose of this event was about giving recognition and protection to what is deemed a very important part of eastern Connecticut.

The communities share an ambition to preserve the rural personification of Connecticut, while allowing for responsible development that will keep local economies vibrant.

The goal of the compact is "ensuring the long-term environmental health, vitality and security of the watershed to enhance the social and economic strength of our communities."

For more information, visit [www.nature.org/ourinitiatives](http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives).