

Grassroots Fund Awards Grant to Great Bay Stewards

How do you know Great Bay? Boating? Fishing? Bird watching, walking, swimming, or just watching the Bay itself?

Whatever your connection, you know that Great Bay is an essential part of what makes living on “the Seacoast” unique. But pollution, especially nitrogen and other chemicals brought by increasing development, threatens the ecosystem of the Great Bay estuary.

Fortunately, there is an organization dedicated to protecting the Bay and reversing this trend—the Great Bay Stewards (GBS). Officially established in 1995, the volunteer-based organization works to prevent shoreline erosion, invasive plant growth, or increased nitrogen levels from human-caused water runoff, and is committed to protecting Great Bay for plants, animals, and people alike.

The original volunteers banded together to defeat a proposal for an oil refinery on Great Bay; they later formed the Great Bay Trust to begin protecting the Bay. In 1995, the Stewards formed to support creation of the Great Bay Estuarine Research Reserve and the Great Bay Discovery Center. Active on many issues, the Trust and the Stewards, which merged in 1997, worked to:

- Establish a National Estuarine Research Reserve as a place for education, research, and resource protection. The Reserve includes the Great Bay Estuary (4,500 acres of tidal waters and wetlands) and about 12,000 additional acres of multi-use land.
- Convert former Pease Air Force Base land to a National Wildlife Refuge.
- Develop the Great Bay Discovery Center for Great Bay education programs.

Because the Stewards play an integral role in a variety of programs associated with the Reserve, the New England Grassroots Environment Fund provided the Stewards with a “Grow Grant.” The grant will, in part, support the Stewards’ most recent effort in joining the *Soak Up the Rain* program of the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services.

This spring, the grant funded a mailing designed to educate local residents about improving water quality by becoming better stewards, provide potential leads for the *Soak Up the Rain Great Bay*, and increase GBS membership. The mailing also let homeowners know they can receive a step-by-step guide to practices that will make their individual landscapes more environmentally safe from pollutants and runoff.

The Grassroots Fund, which uses stories, tools and dollars to fuel local activism and social change, has funded better than 1,700 different community groups across the region since its founding in 1996. According to Julia Dunderf, the Fund’s executive director, the Grassroots Fund hopes the grant to the Stewards “will help them reach more people in the Great Bay watershed, both to garner more support for Stewards’ programs and to show people how they can help preserve the Bay.”

The impetus for the Stewards’ *Soak Up* effort, pending EPA rules, are designed to reduce pollution in ground water and surface runoff. GBS participation in *Soak Up* will reduce nitrogen, the fertilizer for algae, and help preserve the Bay’s eel grass and oyster populations, says Peter Wellenberger, GBS executive director.

“The eel grass is our canary in the coal mine. We are continuing to see a

decline in cover and especially in density,” he says, adding that “algae is winning the war right now.” But with the expanded communications made possible by the Grassroots Fund, action by more people around the Bay can tip the scales.

To find out more about the grant-making activities of the New England Grassroots Environment Fund, visit grassrootsfund.org; for more information about the Great Bay Stewards, visit greatbaystewards.org.