



Connecticut River Coastal Conservation District, Inc.

P R E S S R E L E A S E

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Coginchaug Regional High School Team Wins CT Envirothon

On May 21, 2015, forty-two teams of high school students and their advisors from all over Connecticut—including Coginchaug Regional High School (Durham-Middlefield)—convened in the early morning at Connecticut College Arboretum for the 24th annual CT Envirothon field competition. We are excited to report that the Coginchaug Regional High School team, mentored by Science Department Chair, Susan Michael, came in first place with a score of 442, 21 points more than the second place team. The school has been participating in the Envirothon since 1997, and has consistently done well but has never placed first. This year's team members include seniors Amelia Bianchi, Natalie Charette and Tyler McDonald, and juniors Matthew Sawicki and Lilian Zhou. Senior Ryan Gossart, and sophomore Troy Willis also trained with the team as alternates, and competed on a wildcard team, a team of extra students. Congratulations to all for this excellent achievement!

CT Envirothon (www.ctenvirothon.org/) is a high school natural resource education program begun in 1992 by the five CT Conservation Districts, including the Connecticut River Coastal Conservation District. During the school year, students learn from web-based resources and hands-on work with environmental specialists in a series of workshops covering soils, forestry, wildlife, aquatics, and a changing current issue, this year Urban Forestry. The program culminates with a field competition in May, in various locations throughout the state. CT Envirothon is guided and coordinated by a Steering Committee made up of Conservation District staff and board members, and other environmental professionals from state/federal agencies, colleges/universities, and private companies and nonprofit organizations.

The mission of CT Envirothon is to promote environmental awareness, knowledge, and active personal stewardship among high school students through educational workshops and team competition. CT Envirothon challenges the students—our next generation of environmental stewards and professionals—to develop critical thinking, cooperative problem-solving and decision-making skills to balance quality of life and environmental sustainability; and also provides networking and professional development opportunities for science teachers. CT Envirothon is part of the North American Envirothon program, and the winning team from each state or province travels to the National Envirothon in the summer to compete with the top teams.

This year Coginchaug Regional H.S. came in first for soils, tied for first in aquatics, and came in second in the current issue, fifth in wildlife, and sixth in forestry. The students worked in specialized areas, but the

group also did a lot of team training during the year. Amelia Bianchi was the team's aquatics specialist and was also on the school's Ocean Bowl team, which won the CT/RI Quahog Bowl and also went to the National Ocean Science Bowl in Mississippi this year (as well as last year in Seattle). Natalie Charette and Matthew Sawicki worked on soils.

"Team work is essential to winning, especially in the current issue presentation," according to Advisor Susan Michael. This component of the Envirothon competition involves developing and presenting a plan in front of a panel of judges. "This year the team had to do a forest inventory of a local urban forest and come up with a plan to remediate and improve three of six possible aspects of the property. We chose water quality, biodiversity and community benefit. The plan was based on Allyn Brook Park in Durham, and the students and I worked on the project for over 15 hours (a conservative estimate). The students had to work on it in order to be able to answer the judges' questions."

All team members have an interest in the environment and have been members of ECO, the high school's environmental club. Amelia Bianchi has been on the team since her sophomore year (three years), and the remaining members joined last year and have two years of experience.

Travel to Saturday training workshops is made possible by use of The Benchwarmers Van, generally for athletic events, thanks to the support of the school district. Teachers cannot drive students in their own cars due to a CT state law. ECO helps pay the nominal registration fee for the club.

The CT Envirothon Steering Committee has generously paid the \$1300 registration fee for the National Envirothon at Missouri State University in late July-August (for room, board and events for the week for seven people); and \$3100 for travel expenses. The team is paying the remainder, and hopes to do one fundraiser before the trip. As Susan Michael put it, "The team is EXTREMELY grateful for the financial support!"

So what's next for the Envirothon team members? Troy Willis, Matthew Sawicki and Lilian Zhou plan to participate again next year. Amelia Bianchi is going into Marine Sciences at Roger Williams; Natalie Charette plans to study Nursing and Psychology at Trinity; and Tyler McDonald and Ryan Gossart, both strong science students, are going to Northeastern and Tufts, respectively. We wish this year's team members all the best in their future endeavors! Many past team members have pursued environmental sciences, such as Melanie Poole (2008), who studied Botany at Connecticut College and now works in environmental education; Aubree Keurajian (2011), who just graduated from Cornell with a Geology/ Environmental Sciences degree; Paul Benjunas (2011), an SCSU science education major with a specialty in outdoor education, and Aleah Querns (2013) who is studying wildlife biology at North Carolina State University.

Connecticut River Coastal Conservation District Inc., a nonprofit organization based in Middletown, CT, works to conserve the natural resources of towns in the lower Connecticut River watershed and coastal areas. For more information about District technical and educational programs and services, visit our website at www.conservect.org/ctrivercoastal.

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