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## **New Jersey's Merrill Creek Reservoir Earns Governor's Environmental Excellence Award**

***New Jersey DEP recognizes site for its 'Healthy Ecosystems and Habitats'***

HOLMDEL, New Jersey – The Merrill Creek Reservoir (MCR), a 2,700-acre water supply and environmental preserve part-owned by FirstEnergy's Jersey Central Power & Light electric company and FirstEnergy Pennsylvania (FEPA), which does business in the eastern part of Pennsylvania as Met-Ed, has been recognized as a 2024 Governor's Environmental Excellence Award winner by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP).

Presented during a Dec. 10 ceremony, the award in the "Healthy Ecosystems and Habitats" category highlights the successful collaboration between MCR, local communities and partners such as Terra Engineers, New Jersey Youth Corps of Phillipsburg and New Jersey Audubon.

**John Parke, Environmental Specialist at FirstEnergy and Ecologist at Merrill Creek Reservoir:** "The habitat enhancements and restorations at MCR are expected to have far-reaching benefits, not just for wildlife, but for surrounding communities. Our habitat projects serve as models for recognizing the benefits of collaboration for restoration, protection and stewardship of natural resources."

The award recognizes voluntary conservation practices and environmental restoration efforts, covering more than 173 acres of the site. The projects include 75 acres of forest stand

and habitat improvement practices, nearly 98 acres of native grassland management and an acre of new and enhanced pollinator gardens.

Additionally, MCR improved its fish habitat at the property by repurposing autumn olive, an invasive woody species removed during its grassland restoration work, into 78 underwater spider blocks and 17 fish cribs. These man-made structures, which provide valuable shelter, nurseries and foraging areas for fish, macroinvertebrates and other aquatic organisms in the reservoir, are typically made using PVC tubes and plastic pipe. By using non-native vegetation, such as the autumn olive, MCR is able to remove the risk of microplastics being released into the water over time.

Merrill Creek Reservoir is a 2,727-acre property in Washington Township, Warren County, which includes a 650-acre reservoir, 290-acre environmental preserve and forests and fields. The site is home to more than 380 species of wildlife, fish, birds and rare turtles, including dozens of endangered, threatened and species of concern.

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