

MEDIA RELEASE

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For further information contact:

Dave Monti, 401.480.3444, dmonti@rdwgroup.com; or
Tom Borden, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program,
401.633.0550/0552, (cell) 609.955.0395,
tom.borden@nbep.org

Report says bay and rivers cleaner; but climate change is accelerating and putting us at risk

Providence, RI – “The water quality in Narragansett Bay and its rivers has improved through significant infrastructure improvements to reduce excess nutrients, toxic contaminants, and pathogens,” said Dr. John King at the *Narragansett Bay and Its Watershed Report* workshop held Monday, October 23rd, 2017 at Save The Bay Center, Providence. “However, climate change is impacting us at an accelerated rate, so much so that the quality of our environment and the social and economic vitality of the cities and towns in Narragansett Bay and its watershed are at substantial risk.”

Dr. King is Science Advisory Committee Chair of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (developers of the report) and a professor of Oceanography at the Graduate School of Oceanography, University of Rhode Island. King, and colleagues from partner organizations that contributed to the report, highlighted key report findings. The keynote address was given by Robinson (Wally) Fulweiler, an Associate Professor in the Department of Earth and Environment and the Department of Biology at Boston University. Fulweiler said, “Narragansett Bay is an ideal natural laboratory to test the impact of human activities on ecosystem function on both local (e.g., nutrient loading and now nutrient mitigation) and regional/global (e.g., warming water temperatures) scales. We have intensively studied Narragansett Bay for over seven decades. As a result, we are uniquely poised to assess how estuaries change under complex and interacting stressors. Lessons learned from Narragansett Bay are widely applicable and provide an opportunity for better management, protection, and restoration of coastal ecosystems.”

A press briefing was held prior to the workshop with Senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse; Congressmen Jim Langevin and David Cicilline; Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Matthew Beaton; Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management Director Janet Coit; Professor John King, and Judith Swift, Chair of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program’s Steering Committee and Director of the Coastal Institute at the University of Rhode Island.

"This report shows we are making progress and that Narragansett Bay and the rivers that feed it are cleaner. I commend everyone who has worked hard to reduce excess nutrients in the Bay and its rivers. This report also affirms that the federal Clean Water Act is working to reduce the discharge of pollutants to important waterways such as the Narragansett Bay estuary. I will continue working to secure federal support to research, monitor and help advance additional projects to protect and restore the Bay and its watershed," said U.S. Senator Jack Reed.

The *State of Narragansett Bay and Its Watershed Report* combines key findings from a 500-page technical report developed by the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program in collaboration with over 50 research partners in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The geographic scope of the report includes the 1,705 square-mile watershed. While most of the bay itself is in Rhode Island, 60 percent of the watershed lies within Massachusetts.

A key finding of the report is that the bay water is cleaner which proves that investments are paying off. Over the past several decades research and monitoring conditions have steered action plans that dramatically improved the bay and watershed. Investments in wastewater treatment facilities and restrictions on excess nutrients have created a dramatic drop in pollution. The report revealed a 55 percent decrease from 2000 to the present in total nitrogen from wastewater treatment facilities and a 45 percent decrease in total phosphorus. The Upper Blackstone treatment plant in Worcester, Massachusetts had an 80 percent nitrogen loading reduction, the highest reduction of the 37 wastewater treatment facilities in the region. Excessive amounts of nutrients can harm aquatic life by stimulating algal growth, which leads to low levels of dissolved oxygen as the algae die and decompose. Low dissolved oxygen or hypoxia has been a major reason for fish kills in the bay.

Since 2010 the rate of water quality recovery has increased rapidly enhancing the shellfishing industry. In 2017 an additional 3,711 acres in Rhode Island were converted from 'conditionally approved to open for shellfishing' to being 'open without restrictions.' This milestone points to one of the economic benefits of a cleaner bay and watershed along with enhanced tourism, real estate values and commerce as a cleaner bay and watershed supports an enhanced quality of life for those that live, work and vacation here. These successes and others were attained from a financial investment, primarily by taxpayers, ratepayers, and the dedicated efforts of government agencies and private sector partners.

The report relates that more needs to be done to combat the effects of climate change as it is accelerating at a faster pace and the data is unquestionable. From 1960 to 2015 air temperature increased approximately 2.7 degrees F and water temperature rose 2.9 degrees F. Projections call for air temperatures in the region to increase another 5 to 10 degrees by 2100. Additionally, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) projects that sea level could rise as much as nine to eleven feet at Newport by 2100.

"In Rhode Island, we see firsthand the consequences of climate change on our way of life and our coastal economy. As sea levels rise, oceans acidify, and climate change fuels stronger storms, we need to continue boosting efforts like this one to better understand and mitigate the most severe effects on Narragansett Bay," said Senator Sheldon Whitehouse.

"The Narragansett Bay and its watershed affect so many aspects of our lives, from public health and personal recreation to local tourism and commercial fishing," said Congressman Langevin. "We must make responsible decisions that reflect the changing conditions and long-term sustainability of this beautiful natural resource. I commend the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program for this report, which was produced through a thorough and collaborative process and provides a deep understanding of the Bay's ecosystem."

"The Bay is the lifeblood for our entire region. Our families grow up swimming along its beaches, and thousands of Rhode Islanders rely on it for their economic well-being," said Congressman David Cicilline, who advocated for \$5 million for the Southern New England Estuaries Geographic Program and \$20 million for the Regional Coastal Resilience Grants Program during the FY2018 appropriations process. "This report sheds light on the progress we have made but also the tremendous challenges facing the Bay as we contend with climate change and other environmental threats. I am committed to supporting federal investments through the National Estuary Program that provide us with a better understanding of how to protect this incredible natural resource."

“With sixty percent of the Narragansett Bay Watershed contained within Massachusetts, we are proud of the significant strides that have been made to reduce stormwater runoff and the minimization of nutrient inputs entering into the watershed, which has resulted in considerably improved water quality and a more resilient habitat,” said Massachusetts Energy and Environmental Affairs Secretary Matthew Beaton. “The Baker-Polito Administrations remains committed to protecting shared natural resources, implementing innovative methods to combat against the effects of climate change, and fostering strong partnerships to conserve our environmental assets to benefit future generations.”

Key themes of the *State of Narragansett Bay and Its Watershed Report* were highlighted and discussed at the workshop. Unifying report themes include the water in the bay is cleaner; conditions vary greatly among places in the bay and watershed - generally improving with distance from urban areas but urbanized areas are expanding; stressors associated with climate change are increasing; and scientists are tracking changes to bay and watershed ecosystems.

“As the Ocean State, Narragansett Bay and our local waters are at the center of our way of life in Rhode Island,” said DEM Director Janet Coit. “They support our environment, economy, and families in extraordinary ways. And we’ve seen dramatic improvements in their health over the years thanks to the efforts and dedication of many partners. Thousands of acres of the Bay have been reopened to shellfishing, providing new opportunities for quahoggers. And cleaner waters are welcoming more recreational use, including fishing and reopened beaches in the upper Bay. This scientific Report documents this progress while also revealing that the Narragansett Bay watershed continues to be impacted and challenged by many factors, including climate change. DEM will continue to take a leadership role, working closely with the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program and other partners, to foster understanding, reduce pollution, and mitigate threats to our precious rivers and Bay. Congratulations to all involved in the development of this consequential Report.”

“As host of the Estuary Program and a congressional authorized interstate agency serving seven states in the region, we are pleased by the coordination between Massachusetts and Rhode Island on this report. We cannot begin to thank all the partners who contributed to this work. We look forward to facilitating science in the Bay and its watershed focusing on the research and data gaps identified in the report,” says Susan Sullivan, Executive Director of New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission.

A copy of the *Narragansett Bay and Its Watershed Report* can be found at www.nbep.org.

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Formed in 1985, the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program’s mission is to protect and restore Narragansett Bay and its watersheds—in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island—through collaborative action, sound science, and informed decision-making. The Narragansett Bay Estuary is one of the 28 estuaries in the country designated by the Environmental Protection Agency as an “estuary of national significance.”

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