



Watershed Counts

A program co-coordinated by the Coastal Institute at the University of Rhode Island and the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program
<http://www.watershedcounts.org/>



MEDIA RELEASE

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CONTACT: Nicole Rohr; nrohr@mail.uri.edu, (401) 225-4909
Tom Borden; tom.borden@nbep.org, (401) 633-0552 or (609) 955-0395

WATERSHED COUNTS CITES IMPROVEMENTS IN LOCAL BEACHES' HEALTH; FUTURE CLIMATE CHANGE THREATS; AND NEED FOR FURTHER FUNDING

Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island and Massachusetts; July 28, 2014 – Rhode Island and Massachusetts beaches continue to feel the effects of stormwater and wastewater pollution, but investments at the local, state and federal levels have produced a marked improvement in reducing that danger to the health of the shores. Yet with the increased threat of climate change-induced sea level rise and more intense storms, added to fragile funding for beach monitoring, there is a call for increased commitment to clean beaches.

These issues were key features of the *2014 Watershed Counts Report*, an annual survey released today to provide an overview of the health of the Narragansett Bay region. The 2014 Report has a focus on bathing beaches and the critical steps that have been taken to keep local beaches clean and open.

Judith Swift, the director of the Coastal Institute at the University of Rhode Island, said that the Watershed Counts Report addresses both ongoing environmental threats such as polluted runoff, as well as the critical implications of climate change: “Our beaches will be the bellwether of climate change. Not only will we lose beaches due to sea level rise, but increased precipitation will add additional pollutants to our beaches from stormwater runoff. Investing in our beaches will ensure that future climate change events can be minimized and the public can continue to enjoy a trip to the beach.”

The *2014 Watershed Counts Report* highlights the efforts of Rhode Island, Massachusetts and municipalities to protect their beaches. The Narragansett Bay region has 69 licensed saltwater beaches in Rhode Island and 6 in Massachusetts. In 2013, the number of beach closure events was 41, not considered bad compared to prior years: 2012 (34), 2011 (45), 2010 (55), and 2009 (86). These results are promising because beach closures are very much dependent upon rainfall, as stormwater flushes out pollutants and bacteria that close both beaches and shellfishing areas. There was heavy rainfall in 2013, but fewer beach closure events when compared with other large rainfall years – 86 closure events in 2009 and 84 in 2006– but efforts at all levels still managed to reduce to the total closures.

Watershed Counts highlights that actions taken to target the worst pollution sources have resulted in improvements in the water quality at local beaches. Beaches are open more often because towns, with help from state and federal funding, are investing in solving the problems that cause beach closures. Janet Coit, DEM Director applauded those communities that been proactive. “Using green infrastructure and other best management practices to protect beach water quality is paying off. DEM welcomes the opportunity to partner with cities and towns to enhance what is a time-honored Rhode

Island tradition – enjoying a glorious day at the beach.” These financial commitments to improved beaches come at a price. Newport invested \$6 million in an ultraviolet treatment plant and Bristol put nearly \$1.5 million into stormwater upgrades to its town beach. As a result, neither Newport nor Bristol had a beach closure last year. These investments are providing long-term dividends with open beaches and thriving local economies.

Another critical financial commitment is seen in the improvements made in both Providence and Fall River to address combined sewer overflows and improve water quality. The Narragansett Bay Commission, through ratepayer funding, has invested over \$575 million to build a storage tunnel and other improvement to limit the discharge of pollutants from combined sewers during rain events. Fall River has similarly built a tunnel and other improvements and spent over \$160 million to limit combined sewer overflows. These are major investments in public health. Addressing combined sewer overflows has significant implications for water quality and has allowed shellfish beds to be open for harvesting more often. In what would be a significant step forward for regulators and the public alike, urban beaches such as Sabin Point Beach, in East Providence, may reopen after decades of being closed.

What is surprising in beach management is the limited amount of state funding to monitor marine and freshwater beaches. The funding for marine beach monitoring comes mostly from federal sources. The National Beach Program provided over \$200,000 to both Rhode Island and Massachusetts in 2013. The state budgets contained no funding, despite the fact that beaches are an economic driver, and that the federal monitoring program for saltwater beaches has recently been at issue for possible elimination in federal budget talks. No federal funds are available for monitoring local freshwater beaches – 52 in Massachusetts and 36 in Rhode Island – that Watershed Counts sees as necessary to ensure the public those beaches are safe for swimming, fishing and recreation. There were 16 and 5 freshwater beach closure events in 2013 in Massachusetts and Rhode Island respectively.

Governor Lincoln D. Chafee applauded the report: “The *Watershed Counts Report* provides an important spotlight on the water quality of our invaluable beaches and the fact that keeping beaches open requires monitoring and investment. The voters of Rhode Island have an opportunity to support additional investment in water quality improvements this November by voting for a bond that is targeted to those issues.”

The *2014 Watershed Counts Report* is developed annually by a collaborative effort among state, federal officials; environmental and civic organizations; the business community; and scientists and researchers at local universities. The report is available on-line at <http://www.watershedcounts.org>, or contact Tom Borden directly at tom.borden@nbep.org or (609) 955-0395 or Nicole Rohr at nrohr@mail.uri.edu or (401) 225-4909.

