



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

IMPORTANT! - EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE UNTIL 12:01 A.M. ON NOVEMBER 2, 2015

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Health of Urban Waters of Narragansett Bay

Focus of 2015 Watershed Counts Report

Local Projects Successful, More Comprehensive Effort Needed to Succeed

The health of Narragansett Bay and its watershed as a whole continues to improve, but major challenges remain in the urban areas; however, local, site-specific efforts to address urban water quality are seeing progress. These are the main messages from the 5th annual *Watershed Counts Report*, which each year evaluates the land and water resources of the Narragansett Bay region, and highlights the work being done to protect and restore the bi-state Narragansett Bay watershed.

“The urban projects featured in this yearly report can and should help drive more, broader and integrated initiatives in upper Narragansett Bay,” said Tom Borden, program director of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program, which coordinates the annual report along with the Coastal Institute at the University of Rhode Island. “The benefits to residents of Rhode Island and Massachusetts are not only environmental and societal, but have a direct link to enhancing the region’s economy. And since the heaviest pressures and impacts on the Narragansett Bay watershed come from its most populated areas, that is where the greatest challenges lie and need to be taken on.”

Upper Narragansett Bay water quality is impacted by cities and urbanized areas throughout the watershed. Whether it is Taunton or Fall River, Providence or Pawtucket, water quality is impacted by runoff that carries pollutants and harmful bacteria, which prevents many urban waters from being safely fishable or swimmable. Development patterns have led to increased flooding, beach closures, and limited access to waterways, with escalating climate change serving to exacerbate these impacts, including those affecting the diverse marine life that calls Narragansett Bay its home.

“While the health of the Bay as a whole continues to improve and we’ve made great progress in cleaning up the Upper Bay, our urban waters lack public access and continue to experience poor water quality conditions during much of the year,” said Jonathan Stone, executive director of Save The Bay, one of the Watershed Counts partners. “Improving public access and reducing polluted run-off remain important priorities along the Providence and Seekonk Rivers. We are excited about ongoing efforts to open a public swimming beach at Sabin Point and to build a new public pier at Fields Point. Both projects serve as models for future progress.”

The *Watershed Counts Report* says it will take significant, comprehensive and well-coordinated investments to tackle these challenges to ensure that in the near future beaches are open to visitors, fish are safe to eat, and water-based economies are protected.

"Partners in the watershed are making investments that have important local impacts, but these isolated efforts need help to take on the big issues such as improving water quality and adapting to climate change," said Nicole Rohr, assistant director of the Coastal Institute. "Unfortunately, the scale of effort that is needed is not currently in development, but more elected and appointed leaders are starting to make the important link between the environment and the economy."

"A growing economy needs a healthy Narragansett Bay to prosper, especially in our most populated areas," said Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo. "States, municipalities, businesses and advocates for a cleaner Bay need to continue to work together to solve the special problems faced in our largest communities."

Two-thirds of the Narragansett Bay watershed lies in Massachusetts, and what takes place there inevitably has an impact on Narragansett Bay as its rivers and streams eventually flow into the Bay. Improvements in wastewater treatment plants in Massachusetts, and dam removals have not only improved water quality and the aquatic habitat, but have lessened the risk of flooding.

"The Massachusetts dam removal projects in the Taunton River area have benefited both local residents and businesses who were vulnerable to future floods, and it has also restored the natural flow of the rivers to provide a healthy fishery and cleaner water as it flows into Mt. Hope Bay," said Tim Purinton, director of the Division of Ecological Restoration in the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game, another Watershed Counts coalition member.

On the Blackstone River, a major tributary to Narragansett Bay that runs through both Rhode Island and Massachusetts, an effort is underway to enhance the region's historical, cultural and water-oriented heritage by improving public access for recreation and fishing, as well as highlighting a cleaner river flowing through Pawtucket's commercial district.

"Access and amenities to Pawtucket's urban parks and waters, along with a national spotlight on the Blackstone River's heritage, is a significant investment. It is one which will help drive private development and ensure additional sites are remediated creating greater opportunities for the community," said Christine Sullivan, interim executive director of the Pawtucket Foundation, a member of the Watershed Counts partnership.

Watershed Counts is a coalition of over 60 non-profit entities, government agencies, academic institutions, and other organizations who work together to report regularly on the land and water resources of the Narragansett Bay region. The annual Watershed Counts report highlights the important work that many partners do every day to protect and restore the Narragansett Bay watershed. It is co-coordinated by the URI Coastal Institute and the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program.

For downloadable copies of the *2015 Watershed Counts Report*, past reports, and further information, go to www.watershedcounts.org.

This project was funded by an agreement (CE96184201) awarded by the Environmental Protection Agency to the New England Interstate Wastewater Pollution Control Commission on behalf of the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program. Although the information in this document has been funded wholly or in part by the United States Environmental Protection Agency under agreement CE96184201 to NEIWPCC, it has not undergone the Agency's publications review process and therefore, may not necessarily reflect the views of the Agency and no official endorsement should be inferred. The

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