

Summary of the Watershed Counts Meeting

Wednesday, January 29, 2014

10:00 AM - 12:00 PM at Fall River Heritage State Park



Attendees:

Tom Borden, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program

Walter Burke, Bristol Parks and Recreation

Rachel Calabro, Save the Bay

Michael Celona, Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Priscilla Chapman, Taunton River Watershed Alliance

Ames Colt, Rhode Island Bays, Rivers, and Watersheds Coordination Team

Vanessa Curran, Massachusetts Department of Public Health

John Faltus, RI Department of Environmental Management, Parks and Recreation

Dave Janik, Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management

Jim Kelly, Narragansett Bay Commission

Sue Kiernan, RI Department of Environmental Management

Sarah Klein, Bristol Parks and Recreation

Tom Kutcher, Save the Bay

David McLaughlin, Clean Water Access, Newport

William Mitchell, RI Department of Environmental Management, Parks and Recreation

Amie Parris, RI Department of Health

Heidi Ricci, Mass Audubon

Nicole Rohr, URI Coastal Institute

Caitlyn Whittle, USEPA Region 1

Welcome and Introductions

Nicole Rohr and Tom Borden welcomed all to the meeting and provided an overview of the purpose of the meeting. They reiterated that the Watershed Counts consensus was that the 2014 report should shine a “spotlight” on the Freshwater and Marine Beaches indicator. In addition, the other established indicators will be updated if there is new data to incorporate and a shortened synopsis will be given in the report. Indicators that do not have new data available will also be briefly covered in the report but the reader will be directed to the website for more in-depth information. This will allow the report to both give an overview of the various watershed indicators and give adequate space for a focused and in depth analysis of the “spotlight” indicator.

A focus on beach water quality will provide room for an analysis of beach closures, progress made to date with various capital improvement projects, ongoing problem areas, importance of stormwater and green infrastructure improvements, and beach monitoring needs, as well as the interwoven aspect of climate change as appropriate. The focus on a “spotlight” issue for the 2014 report will provide adequate time to coordinate the 2015 report and expand it to include additional data from Massachusetts to gain a full picture of the Narragansett Bay watershed.

Overview of Federal Role in Beach Monitoring Programs

Caitlyn Whittle provided an overview of how funds are allocated to states from the U.S. EPA to develop beach monitoring programs and associated public notification systems. The primary focus for use of these funds is on bacteria limits for safe human swimming.

Congress has approved funding for the beach monitoring program for the next two fiscal years and level funding is anticipated.

Overview of Rhode Island Beach Monitoring

Amie Parris provided an overview of marine and freshwater beach monitoring in Rhode Island, which is coordinated through the RI Department of Health (DOH). Beaches are monitored for beach health using accepted levels of bacteria counts as the standard. These bacteria are related to human health and indicate when water is not safe for human contact.

Marine beaches: DOH provides recreational licenses to beach facilities for public use that meet the requirements set forth by the department regarding access and facilities. There are currently 76 saltwater beaches that have recreational licenses. Urban beaches are also public access points and DOH is starting to think about and develop a licensing program for these as well.

A risk-based beach evaluation and classification plan is used to evaluate the licensed facilities. The current time to analyze a sample is 24 hours. When a sample exceeded the acceptable standard level, notification that the beach is closed is given through posted signs, website updates, and additional media outlets as appropriate. The beach remains closed until bacteria counts decrease to below the accepted standard level.

Weather monitoring and environmental monitoring is conducted at each site when samples are collected. In addition, seaweed and algae monitoring is conducted at Easton Beach.

Freshwater beaches: DOH is prohibited from spending time and money on freshwater beach monitoring under the federal EPA grant. Freshwater beaches may also obtain a recreational permit from DOH but this requires a plan for self-monitoring, reporting, and public notification. In general, a small percentage of freshwater beaches are monitored on a regular basis.

An additional aspect that is getting more attention at the state level is cyanobacteria blooms and DOH is currently considering what their role should be in the monitoring of this beach health indicator.

Overview of Massachusetts Beach Monitoring

Michael Celona and Vanessa Curran provided an overview of marine and freshwater beach monitoring in Massachusetts, which is coordinated through the MA Department of Public Health (DPH). Beaches are monitored for beach health using accepted levels of bacteria counts as the standard. These bacteria are related to human health and indicate when water is not safe for human contact.

Marine beaches: There are seven marine beaches in the Mount Hope Bay watershed with connection to Narragansett Bay. Ambient water sampling is conducted on a weekly basis unless a sampling variance is obtained. Local municipalities conduct the water sampling except for state beaches.

If a sample exceeds the acceptable standard level, closures are announced with signs at the beach as well as on the state's marine beach website. They do not announce closures in the

press. The beach remains closed until bacteria counts decrease to below the accepted standard level.

Environmental monitoring is conducted along with the beach monitoring, but weather observations are not collected.

Freshwater beaches: Most freshwater beaches are monitored by the local boards of health and in 2012, 572 freshwater beaches were monitored. The information is provided to DPH for long-term records as well as the publishing of an annual beaches report.

When a sample exceeds the acceptable standard level, the local boards of health (or other organization if appropriate) posts beach closure signs that remain in place until a sample with an acceptable standard level is analyzed.

Rough Outline of Beach Spotlight Issue

It was agreed that the report should focus on the importance of beaches for recreation, tourism, and the environment. The inclusion of the impact of climate change on beaches is a critical component of the report and can be highlighted through the impact of and recovery from Superstorm Sandy.

Items that should be included:

- Maps of freshwater and marine beaches in the Narragansett Bay watershed.
- Overview of how beach sampling is conducted in each state and how these programs are funded.
- Description of what causes beach closures with overview of how impervious cover, rainfall, runoff, water temperature, and flushing rates are all connected. Potential diagram to accompany.
- Report on number of beach closures in 2013, consistent with previous Watershed Counts reports.
- Information on what communities can do to keep their beaches clean both on individual level (e.g. clean up after your pets) and the municipal level (e.g. reduce impervious cover).
- Economic value of beaches (potential update of previous EPA AED report?)

Case studies for consideration:

Marine (heavy RI focus):

- Beach restoration at Misquamicut following Superstorm Sandy. This was a collaborative effort with coordination through the RI Coastal Resources Management Council. (Need to identify a Lead)
- Bristol Town Beach is a holistic example of beach management when adequate funds and personnel time is available. (Walter Burke of Bristol Parks and Recreation to provide information).
- Easton Beach health improvement with the implementation of a UV water treatment system. This would highlight the role of advocates. (Dave McGloughlin to provide information).
- Narragansett Bay Commission Combined Sewer Outflow project (NBC to provide information).

- Fall River Combined Sewer Outflow project (Tom Borden to reach out to Fall River).

Freshwater (heavy MA focus):

- DPH to determine a few good case studies.
- Potential case study on cyanobacteria blooms.

Additional items to consider including:

- RI Beach SAMP
- RI Urban Beach Initiative
- Sand contamination
- Improved turnaround times on sampling results
- Seaweed removal and cleanup
- Cyanobacteria concerns and issues
- Improved communication and community engagement initiatives