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Charles River Watershed Associations, EPA Announce Water Quality Grades for Charles and Muddy Rivers

For years Save the Harbor/Save the Bay has been releasing beach reports cards that rate the quality of the water at state-run beaches from Nahant to Nantasket.

Now the Charles River Water Watershed Associations (CRWA) and US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are getting in on the act. For the first time the CRWA and EPA teamed up on a river report card for the Charles and Muddy Rivers.

According to the report, five out of six segments in the Charles Watershed were graded in the "A" or "B" range with the Muddy River over in the Charlesgate area being the lone exception with a "D-".

In addition to grades for E. Coli bacteria, the Charles River is separately graded on cyanobacteria blooms and Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) discharges, which are both public health hazards, especially for boaters and other people coming into contact with the water when these contaminants are present.

According to the report cyanobacterial blooms, which have occurred with greater frequency over the past several years, are caused in part by excess phosphorus washing into the watershed from lawns and impervious surfaces. CSO discharges occur when heavy precipitation events overwhelm portions

of the sewer system, and discharges of sewage mixed with stormwater are necessary to prevent sewage backups into streets and residences.

"The wide variety in Charles River grades from an A in the middle watershed to the D- in the Muddy River reflect the predominant land use around each area," said Executive Director of the Charles River Water Association Emily Norton. "Areas with more development and impervious surface are more polluted. We have work to do to restore all areas of the Charles to be ecologically healthy."

During the past 30 years, the focus of improving water quality in Boston Harbor has transitioned from addressing major outflows of raw sewage being discharged into the Harbor to identifying and addressing numerous smaller sources of bacterial and other contamination further up the watersheds that discharge into Boston Harbor.

The three major watersheds—Charles River, Mystic River and Neponset River—make up a significant portion of the freshwater inputs to Boston Harbor, and all three have an impact on Boston Harbor water quality. Just as each watershed is unique, there are slight differences in how each watershed association calculates the grade.

However, the grades provide a science-based indication of what many Boston-area residents may not have realized — that bacteria concentrations in the harbor and the rivers are low in dry weather, but that there are significant problems during and after rainstorms, as well as localized problems in some of the tributaries to the rivers.

EPA New England Acting Regional Administrator Deborah Szaro said efforts by citizens and other stakeholders are continuing to tackle these remaining problems so that all residents of Greater Boston can enjoy the benefits of clean water.

"The contributions of citizen scientists to our efforts to improve water quality in these urban rivers cannot be overstated," said Szaro. "EPA is grateful to the three watershed associations for the scientific data collection that has helped us to direct our resources to the most critical areas in need of attention. By highlighting locations with water quality impairment, we find that we are also directing our action to improving environmental conditions for historically underserved environmental justice neighborhoods."

Szaro added that the EPA has also taken additional actions to address elevated levels of nutrients that are harming water quality throughout the Charles River Watershed, with an

eye toward how a similar approach would work in the Mystic and Neponset Watersheds.

According to the report, last year the EPA conducted a wide-reaching process to gather stakeholder input about a potential path to address stormwater runoff from commercial, industrial, institutional, and residential properties in the Charles River Watershed that are not currently regulated. EPA is currently evaluating that input along with existing data and expects to make a decision by the end of the year.

"The Baker-Polito Administration remains committed to working with communities to address water quality issues," said Eric Worrall, MassDEP's Northeast Regional Director. "The investment of over \$225 million to improve wastewater, stormwater and combined sewer systems infrastructure in the Charles River, Neponset River, and Mystic River watersheds, has led to significant improvement in the water quality in all three of these important Commonwealth resources. We continue to be proud of our partnership with watershed associations and the EPA. The information we receive from citizen scientists helps to inform policy decisions that lead to cleaner waterways in the Commonwealth."