



Environmental News

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EPA Sets Clean Up Goal for Charles River by Earth Day 2005

BOSTON – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency set a goal today of making the Lower Charles River swimmable and fishable by Earth Day 2005. Noting severe pollution problems in the Charles following recent rainstorms, the agency outlined a series of actions to reduce contamination in the river and enlisted dozens of community leaders, environmentalists, state and local policy-makers and citizens to join the ambitious effort. The Lower Charles River runs from the Watertown Dam to the Museum of Science.

“At a time when others want to roll back environmental standards and limits our vision, it’s critical that we set ambitious, but realizable, goals that can marshal public resources, and motivate and encourage citizen action,” said John P. DeVillars, EPA’s New England Administrator.

“The Charles River is one of the premier urban water bodies in America. It is a crown jewel of the Boston area and an environmental resource known by millions around the world. Today, at the Head of the Charles regatta, a quarter of a million people will line its banks. But after September’s heavy rains, the river was notable not for its recreational potential but for the stench of sewage,” said DeVillars.

“Today rowers will hope not to get to get wet,” DeVillars added. “But if we work hard and invest wisely, a decade from now they’ll be able to go for a swim at Magazine Beach after the race.”

According to EPA-New England, studies have shown that a one-inch rainstorm can wash more than one hundred thousand pounds of solids into lower portion of the Charles. Scientists estimate that as much as eight thousand pounds of nitrogen and phosphorus (nutrients which can stimulate algae blooms), more than six hundred pounds of copper and zinc, and large quantities of harmful bacteria results from stormwater runoff and pose a health hazard to boaters and other recreational users of the Charles.

To kick off the clean-up project, EPA staff and senior managements joined an EPA-sponsored City Year servathon team in stenciling storm drains along the Charles on Beacon Hill and in the Back Bay with the warning: 'Please Don't Dump - Project the Charles.' "This will remind those who find it convenient to dump waste oil or trash down the nearest grate that our river is at the other end of the pipe," said DeVillars.

Thirty-five cities and towns line the Charles River. The Charles and its banks provide recreational opportunities for hundred of thousands boaters, fisherman, swimmers, joggers, and bicyclists - many of whom live in urban areas and have little access to other natural resources. "Not everyone can afford to go to the Cape on a summer weekend," DeVillars said. "For thousands of inner city residents, the Charles can and should be a clean accessible playground. We intend to make it so."

"We are beginning to realize the benefits of the region's investment in Boston Harbor. The beaches are open, porpoises have returned, and the Harbor waterfronts is once again an attractive place to live and work. Thousand of committed people have devoted their energies, and hundreds of thousands have contributed ratepayer dollars, to the Harbor cleanup; the Charles deserves no less," said DeVillars.

EPA's eight-point plan relies on cooperative efforts among the federal, state, and local governments; citizens participation; good science; and, where necessary, strong enforcement. The plan includes:

- EPA enforcement to remove illegal sewage discharge to storm drains.

Earlier this year, EPA began an enforcement initiative against illegal discharges of sewage to storm drains along the Charles. Cambridge, Brookline, Watertown, Newton, Waltham, Needham, Wellesley, Weston, and Dedham are now working to locate and remove illegal discharges. EPA will follow up with further action as necessary to remove such discharges by the end of 1997.

The Boston Water and Sewer Commission has in place already a program to detect and remove illegal sewage discharges.

- Implementation of comprehensive stormwater management programs

EPA seeks to have comprehensive stormwater management programs in operation in all lower Charles River communities by December 1996. EPA will provide technical assistance to the communities as they develop these programs.

Stormwater management programs will include:

- identification of sources of pollution
- programs to restrict the entry of hazardous waste into the stormwater system
- street sweeping and other measures to reduce the concentration of solids in storm runoff
- development of structural controls to reduce runoff from new development
- other management practices to improve the quality of stormwater

- Formation of "Task Force 2005"-- the Clean Charles Steering Committee

EPA has established "Task Force 2005," a steering committee consisting of state agencies, local communities, and environmental groups, to guide the cleanup project and monitor its success. EPA convened the participants at an organizational meeting earlier this month, and the task force will hold its first official meeting in December 1995.

- EPA establishment of Charles River Enforcement Team

EPA has formed a Charles River Enforcement Team to monitor compliance along the Charles and to prosecute violators where necessary.

While most industries have long since come into compliance with the federal Clean Water Act, EPA will be vigilant in monitoring facilities along the Charles River and will take appropriate action against violators. This week, for example, Conrail faces sentencing in a federal court for illegal discharges to the Charles from its Allston train facility. The company has agreed to pay a \$2.5 million fine (the largest criminal penalty in the nation in the last 18 months and the largest Clean Water Act penalty ever in Massachusetts) with a portion of this penalty being earmarked to support the Charles River Watershed Association's work on the river.

- Control of combined sewer overflows

Overflows from combined sewers discharges nearly a quarter of a billion gallons of mixed sewage and stormwater into the Charles in a typical year. EPA and the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority are developing a schedule for the design and construction of combined sewer overflow controls.

- Support for Charles River Watershed Association's IM3 study

The Charles River Watershed Association is conducting an Integrated Monitoring, Modeling, and Management (IM3) study with support from EPA, the MWRA, and others. The study will examine sources of pollution to the river, model water quality impacts, and assist in the development of an integrated long-term management plan for the watershed.

- Development of funding sources

EPA and the Massachusetts DEP are developing funding strategies to support local communities' efforts for stormwater control.

- MDC participation

As a member of the Task Force 2005, the MDC will review management and operation of the Charles River Dam, restoration of aerators in the Charles River Basin, and control of highway runoff.

DeVillars acknowledged that the EPA schedule is an aggressive one. "I realize that 2005 is an ambitious target. Some may think it is too ambitious. But with hard work, wise investment, and smart science to help

chart our course, it is achievable.”

“We’re working in concert with EPA to obtain these objectives,” said Bob Zimmerman, executive director of the Charles River Watershed Association. “We believe that our ongoing monitoring and management study will aid in putting many of these controls in place.”

Bruce Berman, director of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay’s Baywatch Program, noted his support for the EPA announcement. “In dry weather, the Charles is a great place to relax and enjoy. But recurring pollution problems threaten this recreational resources every summer. Moreover, it was clear after several rains this year that the Charles is a significant source of pollution to Boston Harbor. It’s great to see some leadership on this issue.”

DeVillars praised the cooperation that EPA has already received from state and local officials. “Many of the local communities with whom we are working are as excited about this project as we are. They recognize that they and those they represent will be the direct beneficiaries of the cleanup. The MWRA has also been highly supportive, as have DEP and the MDC. Most of all, though, we need citizen involvement. The restoration of the Charles River is a goal of the community, and will require a community effort.