

## **Benefiting from the Restoration of the New York-New Jersey Harbor Estuary**

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The health and prosperity of our communities depend directly or indirectly on the many resources and services that we gain from the Estuary. It is therefore critical to preserve and improve the health of the Estuary for the benefit of our families and future generations.

In 1988, the New York-New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program (HEP) became one of the 28 National Estuary Programs currently authorized under the federal Clean Water Act. This partnership-based effort is designed to restore the water quality and health of the estuary, thus improving the well-being and sustainability of our communities. A management plan was completed with the input of many federal, state and local governments as well as citizens, non-profit organizations, and industry. During this session at the 2010 Annual Conference of the NJ League of Municipalities, HEP partners will present information on the status of the estuary, what is being done to restore it, and opportunities for municipalities to get involved and ultimately benefit from the effort.

With increasing population and the coming of the industrial age in New Jersey, water quality and the land around the estuary began a long slide to degradation. People began to turn their back on the waterfront and thought of the estuary not as a resource, but as a place to dispose of waste. Significant actions such as the passage and implementation of the Clean Water Act and other environmental legislation have done much to bring the harbor back from the brink. Today we are optimistic, but we still have many problems to address: too many pathogens and not enough dissolved oxygen in some waters, contaminated fish and shellfish, limited public access, and degraded natural areas. Healthy estuaries provide many essential services to the communities that depend on them: from fish and shellfish, to economic revenues from tourism and transportation, to health benefits derived from physical activity at waterfront parks, just to name a few.

The top priority of the Estuary Program is to restore the resources we all share and depend on within the Estuary. Restoration will result in numerous benefits to our communities. It will improve sediment quality, decreasing the cost of disposing of dredged material from the port and reducing fish contamination; enhance the beauty of natural areas providing recreational opportunities, improving air quality, adding aesthetic value, and ultimately resulting in more livable and desirable communities; revitalize and create habitats for plants, fish, and wildlife, and increase biodiversity in the region; control flooding; and prevent eroded soil from smothering underwater habitats for things like oysters and sea grasses. This will contribute to healthier families and stronger economies, and will help ensure that future generations are able to enjoy the Estuary's invaluable resources.

Restoration projects can take place on a large scale as envisioned for Liberty State Park, or on a smaller scale such as in pocket parks and stream-bank restoration. The Bayonne golf course opened a few years ago and is a great example of how private investment in a degraded waterfront area can result in a money-making enterprise that also provides

environmental restoration and a beautiful community asset. Other important ongoing restoration projects in the area include the commitment of \$10M of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding to assist with the restoration of Lincoln Park in Jersey City. Many more opportunities exist as noted in the draft Comprehensive Restoration Plan, the development of which was lead by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in conjunction with many other partners. Because the effort is meant to involve and will benefit everyone, it calls all community members to work together in the restoration of “The Waters We Share.”

Public access to the waterfront for passive and active recreation is a huge asset for many municipalities. From the Hudson River Waterfront Walkway, to kayak access on the Hackensack and Passaic, to swimming along the Raritan Bayshore, citizens love their water. HEP is seeking ways to promote appropriate and safe public access as a way of increasing support for the overall restoration of the estuary. Again, coordination with municipal plans is key.

In 2010, HEP is focusing some of its effort on restoration of fish passage in areas such as the Raritan River. There are many small dams and other obstructions that prevent the natural and necessary movement of certain species of fish like alewives and eels from reaching spawning grounds. Not only is this important for coast-wide fisheries, but it also helps local population of sport fish like striped bass that feed on them, boosting the recreational fishing industry. Municipal involvement and support of these projects is often critical for allowing access and coordinating with other priorities.

Water quality continues to be an issue in the estuary, especially pathogenic bacteria that limit shellfishing, swimming and other so-called “primary contact” activities. By far, the largest sources of pathogens in our waterways are Combined Sewer Overflow (CSOs) and stormwater discharges. Unfortunately, the cost for controlling these discharges may be quite significant. The federal government historically provided millions for upgrading waste water treatment plants through construction grants programs and State Revolving Fund (SRF). While the recent infrastructure funding through the ARRA was welcome, the days of large federal grants for treatment plants are not currently with us. It is therefore important that all interested parties work together to plan, identify resources, and implement this work in a coordinated fashion.

In many communities, citizens and non-profit groups are doing their part to clean up waterfronts, restore habitats, and curb nonpoint sources of pollution. These are important efforts that augment work by the municipalities, state and federal governments. By staying in communication with the NY-NJ Harbor Estuary Program, municipalities are alerted to opportunities for funding and participation in restoration planning and implementation.

Local ordinances that reduce plastic pollution and encourage green infrastructure on public and private land can go a long way to helping improve the quality of life in a community and how it sees itself. In Elizabeth and Newark, HEP has funded several small-scale green infrastructure demonstration projects that have involved students and

volunteers. HEP has also funded many litter cleanup events in northern New Jersey. These kinds of projects spread the awareness of being good stewards. In addition, if implemented extensively, small-scale green infrastructure projects could contribute significantly to a reduction in stormwater and CSO discharges. New York City, as part of its PlaNYC, is promoting green infrastructure as a cost-effective way to decrease reliance on some large capital infrastructure projects. Similar opportunities also exist in New Jersey.

Visit our website at [www.harborestuary.org](http://www.harborestuary.org) for more information about the New York-New Jersey Harbor Estuary Program, its partners, and the opportunities that exist for your municipality to be informed and involved.

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