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LONG ISLAND



RANDIE DADDONA

The Long Island Sound report calls for more shellfishing and fewer beach closures.

Study: Sound needs more wetlands, grass

BY JENNIFER BARRIOS
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Long Island Sound needs further action to preserve and grow critical eelgrass beds and wetlands, increase shellfishing and lower the number of days beaches are closed due to pollution, according to a multiagency plan for the water body released yesterday.

The 2015 Long Island Sound Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan is a wide-ranging document intended to help policymakers, scientists and the public steward the future of Long Island Sound over the next 20 years.

“We’re referring to this as a blueprint,” said Judith Enck, Region 2 administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and member of the policy committee for the Long Island Sound Study, which produced the plan. “We’re counting on local government officials, members of Congress and state and federal regulatory agencies to take a very hard look at this and work toward implementation.”

In addition to the EPA, the plan was developed with state officials in both New York and Connecticut, local governments, scientists and members of environmental and other groups.

The goals in the report include:
■ Restoring eelgrass in the Sound, with an ultimate goal of 4,550 acres of the underwater vegetation established by 2035.

■ Increasing the area cleared for shellfishing by 5 percent from 2014 levels.
■ Restoring 515 more acres of tidal wetlands, especially in areas such as Lloyd Point Harbor and Mount Sinai Harbor Islands.

■ Conserving 3,000 acres of land in New York within the Sound’s coastal boundary, with 150 acres to be preserved each year.

■ Reducing beach closures and increasing the number of public access points to the Sound.

The plan also includes a section on strategies for funding these measures, noting money will be needed from “federal, state, and local governments in partnership with the private sector, with each contributing its fair share.”

R. Lawrence Swanson, associate dean of Stony Brook’s School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences and co-chair of the study’s science and technology advisory committee, called the plan “a guiding document for scientists.”

“Now that we have an understanding of where we are, where we need to go, we can begin to identify important scientific research that needs to be done,” he said.

The effort is an update of a previous report by the Long Island Sound Study that was completed in 1994.

But while the 1994 report centered on issues stemming from pollution in the Sound, the new plan focuses on how climate change will affect the water body.

“Climate change is front and center in terms of our action agenda for Long Island Sound,” Enck said.

Several recommendations in the 1994 report met with success — such as an increase in eelgrass beds, a restoration of 1,650 acres of coastal habitat, and a reduction in nitrogen due to improvements at wastewater treatment plants that discharge into the Sound, Enck said.

“We can improve the health of our coastal waters. We don’t have to accept their decline,” said Mark Tedesco, director of the EPA’s Long Island Sound office and chair of the study’s management committee. “This plan now is to keep that progress going.”