EPA urged to protect Narragansett Bay

Staff pushes EPA to lead on clean water

For more than a year, big polluters have blocked legislation to restore the Clean Water Act. With action at a standstill on Capitol Hill, Environment Rhode Island is pushing the Environmental Protection Agency to step in and restore full protections to the streams and wetlands that feed Narragansett Bay.

178 beach closings in 2009

Recent Supreme Court decisions have weakened the Clean Water Act and called into question whether more than half of Rhode Island’s streams, including upstream waters that feed Narragansett Bay, are still protected. Without these protections, polluters can dump waste with impunity. Ultimately, the Bay pays the price.

And it’s a price Narragansett Bay can ill afford to pay—its waters already suffer from excess pollution and sewage runoff. Rhode Island saw 178 beach closings in 2009 alone, a 44 percent increase from 2008. Contaminated beach water can make swimmers vulnerable to a host of waterborne illnesses, including stomach flu, neurological disorders and other serious health problems.

Our staff has filed a Clean Water Act lawsuit against the town of Newport to stop illegal sewage dumping into Narragansett Bay—and now we’re working to defend the Clean Water Act itself.

Time for EPA to act

As the health of Narragansett Bay continues to worsen, it’s more important than ever that our leaders in Washington, D.C., restore the Clean Water Act. But with no Congressional action in sight, our staff and members are calling on the EPA to get involved.

EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson is currently considering a new clean water initiative, saying that the EPA would “consider administrative action to restore the Clean Water Act protections to wetlands and headwater streams that provide clean water for human and ecological uses.”

But with the new Republican majority in Congress itching to hamstring the EPA, and well-connected polluters lobbying against strong protections, the EPA needs all the public support we can muster. We’ve banded together with our sister groups across the country to rally thousands of people nationwide to send the EPA a message: Americans want strong protections for our waters.

Winter Report | 2011
Recent action

Drilling ban declared for 450 million acres of ocean
This December, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced the Obama administration’s intentions to protect the Atlantic coast, Pacific coast and eastern Gulf of Mexico from new oil and gas drilling.

After nine months of campaigning to protect America’s shores, more than 450 million acres of our coastal waters—an area three times the size of California—are finally “off the table” for drilling from 2012 to 2017.

“All anyone who loves our beaches, fishes in the ocean, depends on a healthy coastal economy or cares about reducing our oil dependence can thank the Obama administration for protecting the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and the west coast of Florida from oil drilling,” said Margie Alt, the executive director of Environment Rhode Island’s national federation.

Report: March floods just the beginning
Last year’s catastrophic March floods caused more than $200 million in damages in Rhode Island—and they were just the most destructive example of the strange weather that has pummeled Rhode Island and the entire country for several years. According to a new Environment Rhode Island report, “Global Warming and Extreme Weather,” extreme weather events lead to billions of dollars in economic damage and loss of life, and scientists project that global warming could affect the frequency and severity of such events in coming decades.

“The increasingly frequent and severe weather events of recent years prove that climate change has already begun to change our planet,” said U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, who joined us in releasing the report. “In Rhode Island, this reality hit home in the form of the March floods. We should not only better prepare for severe weather, but also address the root cause by taking steps to reverse climate change.”

To our members
As the political winds shift every two years on Election Day, we consider how that will affect our prospects for protecting our environment. To be sure, the national results from November mean that we will face some uphill battles in Congress to defend our air, land and water. But closer to home, perhaps we can look forward to Lincoln Chafee bringing his stellar environmental record to the governor’s office this year.

But regardless of who wins and loses each election cycle, we’re keeping our eyes on the challenges facing Rhode Island’s environment. We’re doing a better job of keeping pollution from running off into Narragansett Bay, but we need to do much more. We have tremendous potential to harness the winds blowing across our coast, but the policies that can make it happen are being challenged.

Regardless of who’s up and who’s down in Providence and in Washington, we have our work cut out for us. Thanks to your support, we’re ready to meet the challenge.

Sincerely,
John Rumpler
For Environment Rhode Island

Environment Rhode Island
Report: As park visits rise, funds are being cut

First, the good news: In 2009 more than 150,000 more people visited Acadia National Park, the only national park in New England, than in years past.

What’s the bad news? Even as the number of visitors to Acadia and America’s other national parks is on the rise, these great places face budget cuts in the coming year—leaving them with fewer resources for maintenance, upkeep and stewardship.

A new Environment Rhode Island report, titled “The Best of America Under Threat from Underfunding,” exposed the growing threat that funding shortfalls pose to national park sites like Acadia, and Rhode Island’s own Roger Williams National Memorial.

“Last year, visitors poured into these great parks to go learn about our history and go hiking, camping and kayaking,” said Environment Rhode Island’s Nancy Pyne. “Yet just as their popularity grows, they are under threat from underfunding.”

Acadia National Park: Up 150,000 visits, down $80,000

Acadia and other special places have taken on renewed importance for Americans as the recession squeeze family vacation budgets—leading to the nearly 150,000-person increase in visits to Acadia in 2009. But despite the growing number of visitors, the National Park Service’s proposed budget for the coming fiscal year would cut the park’s operating budget by $80,000.

Acadia relies on these funds to hire park rangers, keep park facilities like the carriage roads and trails like the Beehive properly maintained, and pay for popular programs like camping—so budget cuts will make it even harder for park stewards to keep the park in good shape.

“Now is the time for protecting these great places,” said Pyne. “Instead, they face painful cuts which could delay maintenance, lead to fewer rangers being hired, or force cutbacks on programs.”

Growing popularity, shrinking budgets

The threats confronting Acadia are also being replicated around the country. Environment Rhode Island’s report reveals that nationwide, two-thirds of national parks saw their visitorship climb in 2009, including parks in nearly every state. However, almost three-quarters of these increasingly popular parks are facing budget cuts in 2011.

“Just like Acadia, parks throughout America are becoming more popular destinations,” said Pyne. “They offer families affordable vacations and are ideal places for people of all ages to explore the great outdoors. We need to give our parks the resources to ensure that they are just as majestic a century from now as they were in 2009.”

How many turkeys can you buy at 60 mpg?

With the Obama administration considering a new round of fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks, Environment Rhode Island released a report highlighting how much fuel and money Rhode Island families could save over Thanksgiving weekend if our cars traveled at 60 miles per gallon, instead of the current 26.4 mpg average. U.S. Sen. Jack Reed joined our press conference in Kennedy Plaza, which was covered by the Providence Journal.

Cleaner cars would cut our oil use by 80 million gallons, more than five times the amount the United States imported from Saudi Arabia last year—saving American families a cool $234 million. That’s enough money to put another 13 million turkeys on holiday tables.

And that’s just one more reason—along with our desire to help get Rhode Island off oil and reduce our state’s carbon footprint—that Environment Rhode Island is joining the members of our national federation and other environmental advocates in calling for new government rules that will ensure that by 2025, the average car sold in the United States will go 60 miles per gallon.

Rhode Island’s 2005 decision to adopt clean car standards helped spur the Obama administration to raise gas mileage standards to 35 mpg between 2012 and 2016. Now it’s time to take the next step.
This Election Day, Rhode Islanders overwhelmingly voted in favor of Question 4, an Environment Rhode Island-backed ballot initiative that will invest nearly $15 million toward expanding India Point Park in Providence, preserving Rocky Point Park in Warwick, and renovating Fort Adams State Park in Newport.

Question 4 will allow the state to expand waterfront access along Narragansett Bay, giving Rhode Islanders more opportunities to enjoy Rhode Island’s great outdoors and boosting our tourism industry—the source of more than 50,000 jobs. As the Providence Journal argued in a supportive editorial, it will also provide a much-needed “antidote to despair” when times are hard.

Environment Rhode Island and its allies urged Rhode Islanders to vote for Question 4 and support crucial investment in our open spaces. We will work to make sure the state carries out the voters’ wishes.

Resources won to expand India Point Park