



## ***The Other Side of Harbor Monitoring***

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The MWRA's treated discharge is a proverbial drop in a very, very large bucket (the Atlantic Ocean). Save the Harbor/Save the Bay's Bruce Berman's assertion that the MWRA's outfall tunnel is the largest source of pollution in the bay is incorrect (*Trying to end watch on sewer pipes*, 8.6.09). In fact, the outfall tunnel was created to *stop* the pollution of Boston Harbor. The discharge from the tunnel is not pollution in Massachusetts Bay; rather it is secondary treated effluent, which exceeds U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards. As seen by recent EPA Conservation Law Foundation assertions and discussion of potential lawsuits, the pollution that finds its way into the Bay doesn't come from the MWRA.

As part of a contingency plan which was incorporated in the Authority's five-year National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit (which expired in 2005 and has yet to be re-issued), the MWRA was required to implement a monitoring plan to test the impacts of the treated discharge on Massachusetts Bay. This was in part because of the uncertainties and newness of the outfall pipe when it was put into place in 2000. After almost 17 years of extensive monitoring - eight years of baseline monitoring before the outfall came on-line and nearly nine years of discharge monitoring since - the data shows the both the outfall and the plant are performing as well or better than predicted with no adverse impacts. The outfall monitoring data consistently shows this, questioning the need to continue this effort. In addition, MWRA will continue to perform over 36,000 tests annually on Deer Island's effluent and meet all secondary permit and water quality requirements.

The scientific evidence is clear and consistent:

- water column dissolved oxygen remains at healthy normal levels
- plankton communities remain diverse and normal
- naturally-occurring nuisance algal bloom events (red tides) have not been aggravated by the discharge
- the bottom animal community is healthy and diverse
- sediment oxygenation remains at healthy levels
- contaminants have not accumulated in sediments near the outfall
- contaminants have not accumulated in flounder or lobster
- Stellwagen Marine Sanctuary waters and sediments are unchanged since the outfall went on-line

Seventeen years and \$60 million later, the data reinforces that there is no negative impact. Should the MWRA and its ratepayers continue to monitor what has already been

conclusively proven? Further, should the burden fall solely on the ratepayers when other entities are interested in gaining information through a continued harbor monitoring program? The MWRA Advisory Board suggests that the state and/or other interested parties should pick up the costs to continue monitoring for environmental interests. Is \$3 million per year for monitoring the best use of limited MWRA dollars? While scientists tend to reside in the camp that argues there can never be enough data collected and tested, the Advisory Board suggests that the money could better be spent on more pressing priorities. Three million dollars for monitoring is three million dollars that is not available for maintenance on a wastewater plant that is nearing 12 years of service (and other infrastructure needs). Three million dollars spent on monitoring is three million dollars not available to complete the massive Combined Sewer Overflow projects which will keep urban beaches and waterways cleaner than ever before. Three million dollars on monitoring is three million dollars not available to combat the spread of invasive species in the Quabbin Reservoir.

Communities and their ratepayers in the MWRA service area have paid billions of dollars to allow the MWRA to clean up Boston Harbor. At a minimum, they deserve the right to know that the Authority strives to get the maximum bang for every ratepayer dollar spent. There is no bang left in monitoring.

*The MWRA Advisory Board represents the ratepayers in the 60 cities and towns within the MWRA service area.*

*This is an Advisory Board Op-Ed that was submitted to the Boston Globe for publication.*