



## Report: Merrimack River water quality good, especially in dry weather

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Staff Writer

Thu, May 01 2008

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LAWRENCE — The Merrimack River is clean enough to swim in, but don't dive in during a rainstorm or for several days afterward.

Marking Earth Day week, "hopeful" news about the river's health was unveiled yesterday on the deck of the Abe Bashara community boathouse in South Lawrence. While a host of local, state and federal environmental officials met on the deck at noon, a wakeboarder, enjoying yesterday's 80-degree weather, whizzed along the river behind a speedboat.

The good news is that with few exceptions, Merrimack River water meets state safety standards.

Testing reveals the river water is safe for boating and swimming during dry weather. On the downside, samples taken after rainstorms only met state water quality standards for swimming 63 percent of the time and boating 79 percent of the time, according to a report released yesterday by the Merrimack River Watershed Council, a nonprofit organization.

Those who choose to swim in the river should avoid doing so during wet weather and for three days after, said Christine Tabak, Merrimack River Watershed Council's executive director.

The council plans to continue testing river water quality this spring and summer. A special focus will be placed on the mouth of the Spicket River in Lawrence, where a "bacteria hot spot" was detected. Outfall discharged from the Greater Lawrence Waste Water Treatment Plant also will be monitored, Tabak said.

The testing, overseen by the Merrimack River Watershed Council, is done by a volunteer corps and funded through donations and grants, she said. The council has a staff of three and an annual operating budget of \$180,000, Tabak said.

This year's poor test results are blamed on storm water runoff and sewage that spills into the river after storms, Tabak said. The river is the drinking water source for 300,000 people in the Merrimack Valley, including folks in Lawrence, Haverhill, Andover and Lowell.

Water quality in the river "is critical for human and ecological health," she said.

The Merrimack River Watershed Council was founded 32 years ago to clean up the river and protect and promote the wise use of the river's watershed. Yet, consistent testing of the river had not been done for 20 years until the council coordinated a volunteer effort last summer.

More than two dozen local residents took water samples from various spots. Working off docks and out of motor boats, volunteers collected samples on 22 days through the summer and fall of 2007. Water quality meters were used to measure temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen and solids, salinity and other pathogens and chemicals present in the river water.

The four river sections studied included:

r The estuary in Newburyport to the Haverhill/Groveland town line.

r Groveland to the Essex Dam in Lawrence.

r The Essex Dam to the Pawtucket Dam in Lowell.

r The Pentucket Dam to the New Hampshire state border.

From May to October of this year, volunteers will again collect samples from the river and compile data. The project is supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Massachusetts Environmental Trust and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

Robert Varney, EPA regional administrator, and John Clarkeson, EOEEA assistant director of water quality, both attended yesterday's ceremony.

Want to help?

Anyone interested in monitoring the Merrimack River water quality this year should contact Tracie Sales, Merrimack River Watershed Council water manager, at 978-275-0120, ext. 13 or e-mail her at [tsales@merrimack.org](mailto:tsales@merrimack.org).

About the Merrimack River

r The river is 50 miles long in Massachusetts.

r There are two dams in this stretch, the Essex Dam in Lawrence and Pawtucket Dam in Lowell.

r Ocean tides affect the river between Newburyport and the Essex Dam in Lawrence.

r Two U.S. Geological Survey gauging stations are located on the river. The one in Haverhill measures river height. The Lowell station measures stream flow.

r Salt water intrudes up the river 5 to 10 miles, depending on the tide. The river current can reverse, depending on the tide height and level of flow in the river, up to the Mitchell Falls area in Haverhill.

*Source: Merrimack River Water Quality Monitoring, Analyzing, Protecting and Promoting Project.*

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Photos



Christine Tabak, executive director of the Merrimack River Watershed Council, speaks at the Merrimack River water quality report event at the Abe Bashara boathouse in South Lawrence. Staff photo