



Group helps keep river water healthy

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LAWRENCE -- With the sun reflecting off the Merrimack River, environmentalists from the Merrimack River Watershed Council revealed the results of a water-quality study conducted last summer and fall.

"There is hopeful news and less-than-good news," said Executive Director Christine Tabak.

The study, which was conducted by community volunteers over 22 days, revealed that during dry weather, the water met state bacteria standards for swimming 98 percent of the time and 100 percent of the time for boating.

"The less-than-good news is that during wet weather conditions we did not obtain positive (bacteria) results," Tabak said, explaining that the river met state standards only 63 percent of the time for swimming and 79 percent of the time for boating. "A lot of that has to do with combined sewer overflow from the wastewater-treatment plants. ... They are working very hard to minimize those levels."

Although the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Environmental Protection, Army Corps of Engineers and other groups have conducted intensive surveys of the river in the past, there has not been a regular, routine monitoring program in some time, according to Robert Mansfield, deputy director of the EPA New England

Laboratory.

The MRWC is the first group in 20 years to monitor the main stem of the river.

"The volunteers are the eyes and ears of the Merrimack River," Mansfield said. "And today, they create a voice."

Funding for such projects is beginning to dry up. State funding was not available in Gov. Deval Patrick's 2008 budget and grants are hard to come by, although the watershed council has managed to receive sizable grants in the \$50,000 range over the past two years.

Groups like the MRWC and its monitoring project must receive state approval of the quality-assurance plan before they are considered eligible for funding. The money enabled the council to purchase much-needed monitoring equipment and to hire Tracie Sales, the water resources manager who also oversees the project.

Demonstrating how water testing is done, Sales drops a "water-quality probe," off the dock at the Eaton Street Boat House in Lawrence. A hand-held meter reads the water temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen, total dissolved solids conductivity and salinity.

The MRWC expects to continue its work and plans are in place to monitor and sample the river from May through October.

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