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Water Quality in Most Local Waterways Meeting Federal Swimming Standards More Days Than Ever

Report by New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program Details Recreation and Habitat Benefits of Public and Private Investments Towards Clean Water Act Goals



Photo Credit: At the Race for the River swimming race competitors swim in the Hudson River by Frances M. Roberts, Alamy

A report prepared by the New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program documents that, on average, the number of days most area waterways are meeting the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) recommended pathogen criteria for swimmable waters is increasing. The Lower Hudson River, Upper New York Bay, Lower Bay (including Raritan Bay), and Jamaica Bay in particular saw an increase in the number of days when water quality is safe enough for swimming and other contact recreation. Dissolved oxygen levels, critical for fish and other aquatic organisms, are also generally favorable throughout the estuary and are above federal threshold values.

At the same time, the 2021 Report provides insight into challenges to continued improvement and public use. Smaller waterways where the influence of ocean tides are limited, such as the Passaic, Hackensack, and Raritan Rivers, are not consistently meeting federal targets, which limits public access to the water or dissolved oxygen levels critical for fish and aquatic organisms. Untreated stormwater and combined sewer overflows continue to be a major source of pollution in all waterways.

“Thanks to the collective efforts of EPA, New York and New Jersey, local government, wastewater utilities, and community advocates, our waters are cleaner and healthier for both people and wildlife” said Robert Pirani, Director of the New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program. “While there is more work to be done to meet the promise of the Clean Water Act, and create fishable and swimmable waters throughout the estuary, we can see that continued investment of time and money make that a real possibility”.

“EPA applauds the New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program and its partners for their collaborative efforts analyzing and documenting the water quality of the Harbor Estuary,” said EPA acting Regional Administrator Walter Mugdan. “While progress is being made, continuing challenges exist, and we are committed to supporting efforts to achieve fishable and swimmable waters for local communities.”

“New Jersey is glad to collaborate with regional partners to improve water quality of this shared resource. Regional watershed management that includes thorough analysis of stressors and aggressive action to reduce pollution sources is the best strategy to ensure the continued equitable, public use of our waters” said Katrina Angarone, Associate Commissioner for Science and Policy at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

“The New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program’s new report highlights how collaborative efforts advanced by regional partners have improved water quality, particularly in the Lower Hudson River, Upper New York Bay, Lower Bay, and Jamaica Bay Harbor,” New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Basil Seggos said. “This report showcases the benefits of regional partnerships to improve water quality by documenting our success toward achieving federal Clean Water Act goals.”

“The report highlights the tremendous progress that New Jersey and New York have made since the passage of the Clean Water Act. Many residents and visitors are now able to enjoy our waterways for recreation, encouraging greater stewardship of these waterways” said Allison Fitzgerald, Citizen Advisory Committee’s NJ co-chair and New Jersey City University Assistant Professor. “The report also reminds us that we still have much work ahead to make New Jersey and New York waterways fishable and swimmable year-round. The Citizens Advisory Committee is committed to working with the New York-New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program and its partners to move us steadily towards this goal.”

Carrie Roble, the Citizen Advisory Committee’s NY co-chair and Vice President of Estuary & Education at Hudson River Park’s River Project added “The Citizens Advisory Committee is delighted to see this report published. We know that making data accessible is a key step in engaging the public in local water quality issues and nurturing stewardship of our waters. The report helps readers compare water health across locations in both New Jersey and New York. As such, it will be a valuable resource to stewardship groups throughout the Harbor & Estuary region.”

The 2021 Harbor-Wide Water Quality Monitoring Report analyzed water quality data collected in 2010 to 2017 during the months of June through September and compared average values relative to the federal Clean Water Act goals as well as current regulatory standards in the Harbor Estuary. Water quality is described by concentrations of pathogenic bacteria, such as *Enterococcus* and fecal coliform, which are used to determine safety for human contact. Another parameter, dissolved oxygen, is used to assess the ability of a waterway to support fish and other aquatic organisms. In addition, the report explores total nitrogen and chlorophyll-*a* concentrations to inform how these parameters may impact dissolved oxygen concentration in a waterbody. To understand how swimmable and fishable the estuary’s waters are, these four parameters were assessed against federal recreational water quality recommendations and state water quality standards.

Enterococcus

Percent Summer Days, 30 - Day Geomean Above 35 cfu/100 ml

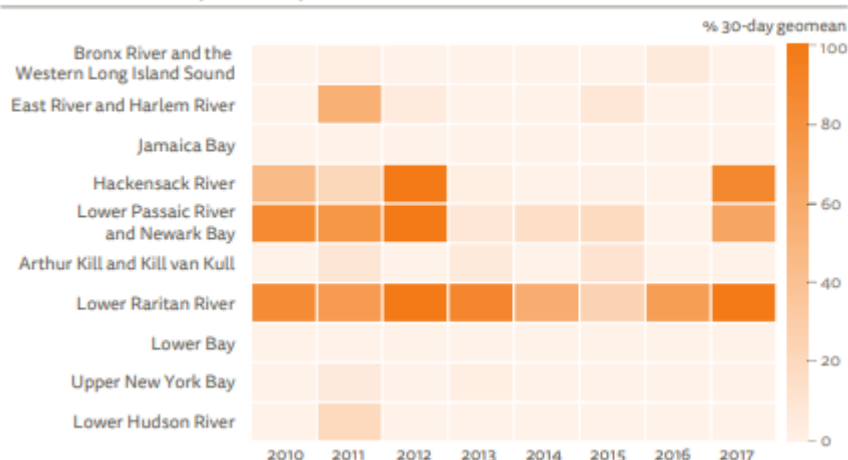
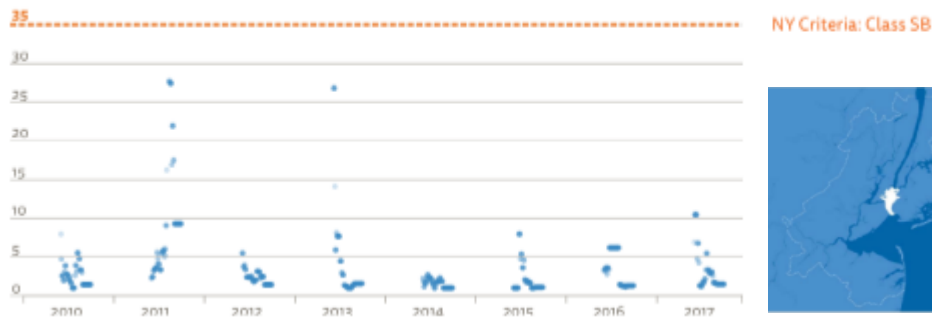


Figure 5. Changes in Enterococci 30-day geometric mean analysis showing percent of time (days) where the geometric mean is greater than EPA’s 2012 Recreational Water Quality Standard of 35 cfu/100 mL over the summer season for each sampling year.

Data presented in the report was collected by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection and the New Jersey Harbor Dischargers Group. The 59 individual sampling stations were aggregated into an individual “master station” to represent 10 principal regional waterbodies in the estuary. Regional waterbody summaries describe water quality relative to federal criteria as well as New York and New Jersey state water quality standards. For example, the Upper New York Bay, a shared waterbody, shows a decrease in the level of pathogenic bacteria over time and indicates that the water quality is generally safe enough for swimming and other contact recreation throughout the summer season.

Enterococcus, 30 Day Moving Geomean
40 cfu / 100 mL



Rosana Da Silva, Water Quality Manager at HEP and the Report’s primary author explains:

“Understanding the quality of shared waters like the Harbor Estuary can be difficult as New York and New Jersey each have different laws, policies, and management approaches when it comes to water quality criteria, standards, and designated uses. This report, which assesses water quality as if the Estuary was a bathing beach, provides an opportunity to look across geographic and legal jurisdictions and identify opportunities for collaboration and future investments to achieve the Clean Water Act goals.”

The report includes an introduction to water quality management, an assessment of water quality against federal criteria, and 10 regional waterbody summaries that compare data to state standards and provide additional information about local conditions. Additional graphs and charts are available in the full report; to download visit www.hudsonriver.org/article/harborwidewq.

Created by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at the request of the governors of New York and New Jersey, the New York - New Jersey Harbor & Estuary Program (HEP) is a collaboration of public agencies, utilities, community and environmental organizations, and independent scientists that work together to improve the health of the Estuary and bring the benefits of the Clean Water Act to people and wildlife. HEP’s 2017 – 2022 Action Agenda presents the shared priorities and the commitment of HEP’s partners to address them. HEP is hosted by the non-profit Hudson River Foundation. <http://www.harborestuary.org/>.