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DEP Issues 2002 Harbor Survey Report Showing Cleaner Waterways And Wildlife Resurgence

Harbor Water Quality improved by 98 Percent in Last 30 Years

DEP To Participate In 18th Annual International Coastal Cleanup On Saturday, September 20.

Hundreds of volunteers visit city beaches to collect and document debris along coastal shores.

Commissioner Christopher O. Ward of the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) announced today that the agency has issued its annual New York Harbor Water Quality Report. The 2002 report is the 93rd in the series, and describes improvements in harbor water quality realized through investments in critical infrastructure and better management of the City's sewage and sewage treatment systems. The Report is available on the DEP website at www.nyc.gov/dep.

Commissioner Ward also noted that DEP will join the American Littoral Society (ALS) this Saturday to encourage New Yorkers to join in the effort to voluntarily clean up New York's shorelines and beaches. The beach cleanup is part of a global Coastal Cleanup. For more information or to locate the nearest cleanup call: 1-800-262-BEACH or contact the ALS at (718) 471-2166, (718) 634-6467 or (718) 318-9344. The ALS website also contains a list of beach cleanup sites at www.alsnyc.org.

Commissioner Ward said, "The massive efforts of the City and environmental groups such as the American Littoral Society, have helped to significantly improve the City's water environment to the point where clean coasts, open swimming locales, and sightings of wildlife have come to be accepted rather than seen as rarities as they were in the past."

"Additionally," continued Commissioner Ward, "water quality in New York Harbor is the best it's been in decades, showing significant declines in pollutants and increases in dissolved oxygen," said Commissioner Ward. Even ignoring the scientific data, the anecdotal evidence is abundant from the vast number of waterfowl breeding in the area, to increased populations of bottom-dwelling organisms, to the fact that

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beach closures have been virtually eliminated. We're winning the battle for the overall Harbor, but there's still work to be done. The next battlegrounds are inner harbor waterways in close proximity to local properties and sewage outfalls that become overloaded during heavy storms -- places such as Flushing Bay in Queens, Paerdegat Basin in Brooklyn and other parts of Jamaica Bay. This is where we need to concentrate our future efforts, even as we reap the benefits of decades of investment in the Harbor as a whole."

The 2002 Report notes that fecal coliform levels -- an indicator of the presence of raw or partially treated sewage and one of the most important water quality indicators -- dropped by over 98 percent in the Inner Harbor and Upper East River since the early 1970s. The trend coincides with upgrades to the four sewage treatment plants that serve those areas: Bowery Bay, Tallman Island, Hunts Point and Wards Island. Other reasons for improvements include better monitoring and control of industrial discharges and the abatement of illegal dumping into the sewer system.

The Report also details the problems associated with combined sewer overflows (CSOs), or the discharge of untreated wastewater during rainstorms and periods of heavy snow melting. Better management of the sewer system and capital improvements have increased the capture of overflow at sewage treatment plants from 18 percent to 62 percent over the last 13 years. In fact, the DEP has developed a series of Best Management Practices which have been largely adopted by the federal EPA as the standard for all communities with CSO problems.

The DEP has also identified 36 CSO abatement projects, totaling over \$500 million. These vary from the construction of massive underground storage tanks near Flushing Bay and Paerdegat Basin to the deployment of booms and nets in canals and creeks near 23 other CSO outfalls. The DEP uses skimmer boats in the Harbor to collect floating trash and debris from CSOs and storm sewers, and collected over 400 tons of material this way in 2002 on just its largest skimmer vessel, the Cormorant.

Another pollution control program listed in the 2002 Report restricts the discharge of certain types of industrial waste into the sewer system. Over the last 12 years, the number of firms regulated under this program has increased from 1,000 to 30,000, with no increase in DEP staff. During that time, heavy metals in wastewater has dropped from 7,800 lbs. to 2,800 lbs. per day citywide. Heavy industry now accounts for less than one percent of the metals in untreated sewage citywide.

In 1998, the DEP initiated a program to eliminate the discharge of untreated sewage into the Harbor during dry weather. This program involved a detailed evaluation of the City's entire 425 miles of shoreline and over 3,000 sewer outfalls. The initial survey found that there was over 3 million gallons a day of untreated sewage being dumped into the Harbor daily. To date, the DEP has eliminated 96 percent of these discharges.

In 1997, the DEP began its annual Enhanced Beach Protection Program to decrease dry weather sewage discharges through better surveillance and improved preventive maintenance. As part of this effort, 92 sewage pumping stations throughout the City have had computerized monitoring equipment installed. As a result, the total amount of untreated sewage bypassed from pump stations and regulators during the 2002 season was just

0.0002 percent of total dry weather flow, a 97 percent decrease from the previous year.

"Some of the main benefits to New Yorkers of all this work and investment is that all public beaches in the City have been open for bathing since 1992, and wet weather swimming advisories have been lifted at all but three of these beaches," said Commissioner Ward. "Shore birds have returned to breed in several parts of the Harbor, and fish and shellfish restrictions have been relaxed."

Spotlight on Jamaica Bay

The 2002 Report reflects a special interest in Jamaica Bay, one of the few areas in the Harbor with persistent water quality issues, and features the critical estuary in a special section. The Report notes that the flow of natural streams into the Bay is negligible compared to the discharge from four sewage treatment plants and numerous CSOs in the area, and that the nature of the Bay has been altered dramatically by dredging and other construction projects that have changed the natural flow of water in the Bay and have effectively isolated certain sections.

Among the findings about Jamaica Bay are:

- ▶ Only 25 percent of the Bay's original 16,000 acres of wetlands remain. From 1900 to 1970 nearly 100 million cubic meters of sediment were dredged from the Bay to fill shoreline marshlands, including for JFK Airport;
- ▶ Over 350 species of birds have been spotted at the Bay, and the Bay supports 49 species of finfish, as well as numerous shellfish and invertebrates and a thriving eel population;
- ▶ Dissolved oxygen levels have been broadly supportive of aquatic species for the last 30 years and have shown improvement over time;
- ▶ Dissolved oxygen levels remain a concern in the deeper waters of the Bay, with some spots being out of compliance with State standards numerous times each year;
- ▶ Fecal coliform levels have decreased by about 80 percent since the early 1970s, though problem spots continue to exist in contained water bodies such as Bergen Basin and Sheepshead Bay;
- ▶ Jamaica Bay has the highest level of algae activity in the New York Harbor region, and has two significant algae blooms each year, from Feb. to March and a smaller one from June to July. The rise in phytoplankton growth has been dramatic and may be indicative of eutrophic conditions;
- ▶ Water clarity in the Bay has been declining over the past 16 years, in part because of the increased algae levels.

"The Harbor Survey Program provides the longest documented assessment of the impact of human activities on the City's water," said Commissioner Ward. "By sampling

at 53 stations and measuring more than a dozen water quality parameters throughout the Harbor, the survey identifies trends and changes and provides a unique database for scientists and educators.”

The full 2002 Harbor Water Quality Survey Report is available on the DEP’s Web site at www.nyc.gov/dep, or by calling New York City’s 24/7 non-emergency assistance number 311.