



Health and Environmental Advisory For Residents of Conimicut Point

September 15, 2003

What's happening?

The recent low-oxygen event affecting the water in Greenwich Bay and upper Narragansett Bay resulted in masses of decaying seaweed and millions of dead fish and clams. Some of this decaying matter, driven by northerly winds, appears to be the source of the unpleasant odors affecting the Conimicut section of Warwick, particularly in the vicinity of Shawomet and Bellman Avenues.

In addition to being really unpleasant, these bad odors made some people feel sick. For others, just living in an environment dominated by bad smells has been difficult. The odor disrupts everyday life and interferes with both outdoor and indoor activities. It adds stress to life and may even aggravate some chronic health problems, like asthma and other serious respiratory conditions. Residents have good reason to be upset. No one would want to deal with conditions like this for long.

Unfortunately, the decaying fish and seaweed cover a large area. This makes intervention difficult. The ultimate solution will depend largely on the natural process of the tides and wind diluting the debris -- and the smell.

What is the state doing?

Since first being notified of the problem on September 5, the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) investigated the area, sampled the air and water, and communicated with local residents. Results from the air sampling revealed trace amounts of hydrogen sulfide; results from the water sampling revealed relatively low levels of fecal coliform bacteria, indicating that the problem is not sewage related. DEM investigated several potential sources of the odor. All of the information gathered to date points to hydrogen sulfide coming from the decaying biomass as the principal cause. DEM is posting updates on the status of its investigation on the Department's website at www.state.ri.us/dem (click "news" and look under "hot topics").

The Department of Health (HEALTH) worked closely with DEM to assess the potential health risks of residents in the Conimicut area. HEALTH also contacted local medical offices and hospitals to make them aware of the problem and alert them to possible health consequences.

In addition to keeping the public informed, DEM and HEALTH, working with the City of Warwick, also plan to take the following actions to help ease the problem and support the residents of Conimicut.

DEM will:

- Track odor complaints and investigate any potential sources of the odors.
- Take additional air samples.
- Update the DEM website if we learn anything new about the nature or source of the odors.

HEALTH will:

- Monitor medical offices and hospital emergency rooms for reports of increased illness—especially respiratory conditions.
- Update health advisories for Conimicut residents, if the situation changes.

What can Conimicut residents do?

- This appears to be an unpleasant but short-term problem; the odor should lessen with changes in wind direction and tides.
- The smell will likely be worse during low tide. If the odor really bothers you, try the following:
 - Keep track of the tides (listed in the newspaper).
 - Close the house windows during low tide or if the wind blows from the shore toward your house.
 - Limit your time outside during low tide.
 - Get away by scheduling your household shopping during low tide.
 - Take a break from the smell; visit family/friends.
 - Treat the odor with household deodorizer or fragrance.
- Stay in touch with shut-ins and the elderly who may feel sick from the odor.
- If you have a chronic health condition, consult your health care provider if feeling ill.
- Report any continuing problems, and any suspected sources of those problems, to DEM's Office of Compliance and Inspection at 222-1360. (For after-hours emergencies, call 222-3070.)

For more information, go to the DEM website at www.state.ri.us/dem. Also check the HEALTH website at www.health.ri.gov for possible updates.

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