



# MASSACHUSETTS Rivers Alliance

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **144 Local Officials Sign Letter Supporting Bill to Provide Public Warnings During Sewage Spills**

BOSTON - 144 elected and appointed municipal leaders from 61 communities today urged Massachusetts House leadership to move a bill forward that would require public warnings whenever there is a sewage spill in a waterway.

Newburyport Mayor Donna Holaday, one of the supporting elected officials, believes this legislation is critically important to protect public health. “As an end user on the Merrimack River, Newburyport experiences combined sewage and stormwater discharges from upriver communities nearly every time it rains. Yet without notification how do we protect our residents, boaters, fishermen, swimmers and others from using the river and beaches when there are high bacteria levels? I strongly support the passage of this bill to protect the health and safety of all persons using impacted waterways.”

The request was made in a letter drafted by the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance, a statewide environmental advocacy organization for the Commonwealth’s rivers and streams. Outreach efforts were supported by the Charles River Watershed Association, Connecticut River Conservancy, Merrimack River Watershed Council, Mystic River Watershed Association and Neponset River Watershed Association.

“We were pleased with the response from municipal leaders across the state. It is abundantly clear that this legislation has broad support in the Commonwealth. We’ll be experiencing more rain in the region with climate change, which means more sewage overflows. Residents absolutely need to have access to this critical information,” said Gabby Queenan, Policy Director of the Massachusetts Rivers Alliance.

“*An Act promoting awareness of sewage pollution in public waters,*” (H.3976) would require those in charge of running sewage overflow outlets to inform the public when raw sewage is entering their rivers and waterways, an occurrence known as “combined sewage overflow”

(CSO). The legislation was filed in both the House and Senate by Reps. Campbell and Provost, and Senator Jehlen.

In a combined sewer system, wastewater and stormwater travel in the same pipe. During large rainstorms, the volume of water can exceed pipe capacity and overwhelm the sewer system, causing raw sewage to overflow. The CSO system is designed to discharge into nearby waters to prevent sewage from backing up into neighborhoods or streets. Newer systems separate stormwater and sewage, so CSOs do not occur. Unfortunately, this antiquated combined infrastructure is still used by 19 cities and towns in Massachusetts. Massachusetts discharges an estimated 3 billion gallons of sewage into the water every year, the largest volume of sewage in New England.

Exposure to waters contaminated by untreated sewage discharges can cause inflammation of the intestines; respiratory, eye, and ear infections; skin rashes; hepatitis; and other diseases. A 2004 EPA estimate concluded that between 1.8 and 3.5 million Americans become sick annually from recreational contact with sewage-contaminated waters. A 2015 study of Massachusetts hospital admissions published in a journal of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences found that emergency room visits due to gastrointestinal illnesses for elderly patients typically increase by 32% in affected communities after extreme rain events.

If passed into law, H.3976 would require that CSO incidents are reported within two hours of the discovery of discharge, updates are given every eight hours to the public during extended discharge periods, and a notification is issued two hours within the end of a project or the end of a discharge. The legislation also requires that signage be posted near water areas potentially affected by overflow discharge. These proposed requirements are similar to public notification requirements in 14 other states. Nationally, U.S. Representatives Seth Moulton and Lori Trahan have introduced similar legislation with the Sewage Treatment Overflow Prevention (STOP CSO) Act.

The legislation is currently pending before the House Ways and Means Committee.

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