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Governor Christie Provides Phase II Action Plan And \$20 Million To Enhance Barnegat Bay Protection Initiatives

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Trenton, NJ – Governor Chris Christie and Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin today visited Ocean County's Cattus Island Park in Toms River to announce a comprehensive action plan for Barnegat Bay and that the state will provide \$20 million to ensure the continued recovery of the Bay. A key part of the action plan is the development of a total maximum daily load (TMDL) standard to reduce the nutrients going into the impaired areas in the northern section of the Bay.

"From the very beginning of my administration I have made it a priority to do what no other administration ever attempted – to implement a cohesive strategy to protect an ecological treasure that is so important for area residents, visitors and the entire state," Governor Christie said. "This \$20 million will fund projects to improve water quality, protect natural resources and restore ecological balance to Barnegat Bay."

Funding for the projects is coming from Natural Resource Damage settlements, proceeds from the state's Corporation Business Tax, the State Revolving Fund for infrastructure improvements, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's 319 (h) Clean Water Act watershed restoration program, and other sources.

"We have laid a strong foundation with extensive scientific research and implementation of efforts to restore and protect natural resources," Commissioner Martin said. "It is vital that this work continues for years to come, as envisioned by the Governor's comprehensive action plan. This funding will largely go directly to local governments and nonprofit organizations that will continue to do the work of restoring Barnegat Bay."

The success of the plan so far is due to the partnerships that have been forged over the years and the immense sense of pride and ownership in the bay's future that this effort has built among countless thousands of people across its 660-square-mile watershed.

"The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is proud to be part of the many collaborative efforts to restore Barnegat Bay," said EPA Region 2 Acting Administrator Catherine McCabe. "In addition to supporting New Jersey's work, EPA awarded more than \$700,000 of National Estuary Program funds this year to assist in improving water quality by reducing sources of nutrients, contaminants, and other debris; restoring shellfish populations; protecting and restoring valuable eelgrass and wetland habitats; and many other efforts to improve the Barnegat Bay watershed."

The Governor and Commissioner Martin released the state's "Barnegat Bay Restoration, Enhancement and Protection Strategy: Moving Science into Action" report developed with extensive stakeholder input to provide the framework for continuing to move forward with the Governor's Barnegat Bay comprehensive action plan, launched in December 2010.

Barnegat Bay is 42 miles long and is very narrow, ranging from 1.2 miles to 3.7 miles wide. The brackish estuary is also shallow, four to five feet deep in most places. Because it only has two natural outlets to the ocean, its water flushes slowly. These features make the bay vulnerable to impacts from nutrients such as fertilizers in stormwater, algae growth, and ecological damage from boats.

Among its key findings, the Moving Science into Action report concludes that while the northern third of the bay is ecologically impaired, and others are showing signs of stress, many parts of the bay and its resources are healthy.

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Specifically, the report notes that the overall health of macroinvertebrates in sediments is good but that the bay continues to show signs of stress from algae blooms, which degrade water quality and reduce dissolved oxygen that fish and other aquatic life need. The highest amounts of the algae-causing nutrient nitrogen, for example, are in the highly developed northern part of the bay, where water flow is also very restricted.

The report adds that damage from boat propellers to underwater ecosystems, such as eelgrass beds, lasts much longer than previously thought, while noting that the problem of stinging sea nettles can be managed through implementation of practices to limit attachment of polyps to structures such as docks and bulkheads.

The report concludes that key efforts needed to improve the health of the bay. Working with the EPA, county and local governments, and other partners, these efforts will include:

- Working with municipalities and other stakeholders to establish a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) standard for nutrients that would be incorporated into stormwater discharge permits in impaired areas, especially in the northern third of the Bay;

- Developing a watershed restoration plan for the Toms River basin as well as watershed restoration plans for key tributaries, including Tuckerton Creek, Westecunk Creek, Mill Creek, Oyster Creek, Forked River and Cedar Creek;

- Continuing to implement enhancement projects for the Metedeconk Creek watershed;

- Continuing to educate municipalities, marinas, homeowners' associations and waterfront property owners on controlling sea nettles by periodically power-washing or scrubbing nettle polyps from bulkheads, docks and other structures;

- Working with municipalities and other stakeholders to establish a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) standard for nutrients that would be incorporated into stormwater discharge permits in 18 of the watershed's 37 municipalities;

- Identifying and inventorying stormwater basins and outfalls needing upgrades;

- Developing and implementing a stewardship program that engages municipalities, schools, golf courses and residents in local projects that protect bay resources;

- Implementing projects to restore submerged aquatic vegetation, which provides critical habitat to many aquatic species as well as spawning, nursery and feeding areas for fish;

- Implementing biological monitoring prior to the decommissioning of the Oyster Creek nuclear power plant in Lacey Township, as well as monitoring after the facility closes to assess the effects of eliminating discharges of cooling water;

- Continuing to conduct long-term water quality monitoring in the bay and its tributaries;

- Preserving and restoring wetlands to reduce nutrient pollution and provide flood protection;

- Implementing a Toms River-area specific pilot study into the effectiveness of the state's fertilizer law at reducing nutrient impacts; and

- Exploring the feasibility of expanding Ecologically Sensitive Areas to reduce boating impacts on sensitive ecosystems.

The DEP's implementation of the 2010 action plan has included spearheading scientific research, conducting extensive water quality monitoring, preserving land, and assisting local governments in reducing impacts from stormwater. Key achievements include:

- Implementing a comprehensive public education program that has included watershed-wide Barnegat Bay Blitz cleanups that resulted in the removal of thousands of cubic yards of litter and debris by tens of thousands of volunteers;

- Providing tens of millions of dollars to finance local stormwater infrastructure-improvement projects;

- Amassing one of the most comprehensive bodies of scientific work on any estuary in the nation through 10 studies, including research on nutrient impacts, the response of fish and crabs to human impacts, sea nettle distribution, the importance of wetlands, and utilizing the health of bottom-dwelling life (such as insects, worms and clams) to assess nutrient impairments;

- Implementing one of the nation's toughest laws regulating the formulation and application of fertilizers;

- Establishing a comprehensive water monitoring network for both fresh- and marine-water quality;

- Preserving through the DEP's Green Acres Program more than 3,800 acres of open space in the watershed since the beginning of the administration, plus more than 7,800 acres preserved by the Ocean County Natural Lands Trust and its partners since 2011;

- Implementing a comprehensive public education program to raise awareness about the importance of the health of Barnegat Bay;

- Conducting green-boater compliance sweeps to heighten awareness of protecting ecologically sensitive shorelines and underwater ecosystems from propeller and wake damage; and

- Securing a commitment by Exelon Energy Corp. to shut down the Oyster Creek nuclear power plant by the end of 2019.

For more information on the state Barnegat Bay restoration efforts, visit: www.nj.gov/dep/barnegatbay.

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