

For Immediate Release

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Salt Ponds Coalition Testing Shows Severe Deterioration of Green Hill Pond and Eastern Ninigret Pond

CHARLESTOWN – Ongoing water-quality testing of Green Hill Pond by Salt Ponds Coalition (SPC) shows that the pond has become severely degraded to the point that it may be inadvisable for humans to use the pond for contact recreation during the summer months, especially after heavy rain events. In addition, SPC testing shows eastern Ninigret Pond has tested high for fecal coliform bacteria (FC) and total nitrogen (TN).

Fecal coliform bacteria testing is used to determine the safety of coastal pond waters for the taking and consumption of shellfish and water-contact recreation. Elevated nitrogen levels often cause massive algae blooms during the warm summer months. When the algae die, decomposition results in depleted oxygen levels in the ponds, which in severe cases can cause fish kills.

Dr. Ted Callender, who heads up SPC's water-quality testing of five coastal salt ponds, notes that one major problem is that Green Hill and eastern Ninigret Ponds are surrounded by a shoreline dominated with high-density housing, many of which are served by outdated waste-water disposal systems, namely cesspools. In addition, Green Hill Pond is poorly flushed and receives little clean ocean water through the Charlestown Breachway. It is estimated that these two coastal ponds receive much of their nitrogen content from stormwater runoff and groundwater input, both of which are minimally regulated in the watershed. A large percentage of the FC bacteria concentrations come from wildlife activities in the watershed and waterfowl on the pond.

Based upon earlier SPC actions, the Rhode Island DEM hired the environmental consultant Horsley Whitten Group to study bacteria and nitrogen pollution in Green Hill and eastern Ninigret Ponds and to offer solutions. Charlestown and South Kingstown have also made efforts to enact improvements in wastewater disposal, but it appears that these initiatives may need more public, political, and financial support to succeed. By reporting the degraded water-quality conditions, SPC hopes that residents in the area will urge Charlestown and South Kingstown officials to further strengthen their cesspool legislation and provide a mechanism to effectively enforce compliance with wastewater regulations. Residents can also lobby for legislative support of wastewater upgrades at the state level.

“We are hoping that residents will join Salt Ponds Coalition as we continue to work on this issue and help fund the water-quality testing through dues and donations,” adds Dr. Callender. Contact information for SPC is available at www.saltpondscoalition.org. Residents are also urged to fertilize their lawns with nitrogen alternatives and clean up after their pets.

Background Information

The findings were based on nutrient and bacteria data for several stations in Green Hill and Ninigret Ponds spanning the years 2001-2006. SPC volunteers collected all water samples, which were analyzed for nutrients by the URI Watershed Watch Analytical Laboratory and for the FC bacteria by the URI Department of Microbiology. Testing centered on the temporal distribution of TN and FC bacteria at three stations in Green Hill Pond and two stations in Ninigret Pond. With the exception of the station in Western Ninigret Pond, all stations were located adjacent to shoreline with very high housing density. In every case, the concentrations of TN increased from 2001 to 2006. In addition, from 2002 until the present the TN concentrations exceeded the TN threshold for impaired water quality and in most cases TN values exceeded the threshold for significantly impaired water quality as determined by the Massachusetts Estuary Project guidelines.

Rhode Island DEM has used SPC FC bacteria data, as well as its own, to determine that the waters of Green Hill and Eastern Ninigret Ponds are permanently closed to the taking of shellfish. In addition, analysis of the SPC bacteria data has revealed that in the years 2001 to 2006, between 15 and 30 percent of the time the FC bacteria counts equal or exceed the 200 MPN/100 ml level; the standard to limit contact recreation. Such conditions exist primarily during the summer months.

Salt Ponds Coalition (SPC) is a 501(c)(3) organization that was incorporated in 1986 with the objective of protecting and preserving the nine coastal ponds along Rhode Island’s south coast. The mission of the Coalition is to: 1) educate the residents of the salt-ponds watershed area on issues relating to the health of the ponds; 2) act as a conduit between citizens of our coastal communities and state and federal governments; 3) implement programs to enhance the environment of the salt ponds; 4) make the Coalition’s ecosystem experience available to other organizations.

SPC administers the Pond Watchers program, which samples the salt ponds biweekly from June through September and supplies water-quality data to local communities as well as environmental management agencies. SPC is the designated watershed council for the salt ponds region as established by the Rhode Island General Assembly. In addition to administering the Pond Watchers program, SPC sponsors projects promoting outdoor recreation, litter control, storm runoff tracking, and the reduction of non-point source pollution.

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