

The Heat Is on in RI: A roundup of environmental happenings from ecoRI News

More Good Beach Days, In Spite of Rain

In the first decade of the 2000s, beach closures were trending in the wrong direction. In 2003, Rhode Island beaches were closed a staggering 503 times because high levels of bacteria, usually following a rainstorm, made them unsafe.

Three years later, in 2006, Rhode Island lost a combined 351 summer beach days. The most beach days lost to unsafe water quality since then was 2009's 230. Last year, the Ocean State experienced 51 closure days. So far this year, five marine beaches — Goddard State Park Beach and Conimicut Point Beach in Warwick, Easton's Beach on Newport, Third Beach in Middletown and Mackerel Cove Beach in Jamestown — have been closed to swimming for a total of 19 days during what so far has been a wet summer.

The closure of Rhode Island beaches is closely linked to precipitation — the more we get, the more stress on our coastal waters.

Stormwater runoff from roads, parking lots, roofs and other impervious surfaces washes contamination, including bacteria and other pathogens, into the Ocean State's salt waters. Wastewater overflows, made possible by heavy amounts of rain, also deliver contaminants, such as fecal coliforms, escherichia coli and enterococci, to beach waters.

Improvements to sewer systems, the addition of infrastructure that treats runoff before it reaches the bay or ocean, and the introduction of stormwater management projects at and around beaches have all played a big role in keeping beaches open and the waters cleaner.

R.I.'s Top Crop Is ... Inedible

Rhode Island sod is integral to the state's agricultural economy. RI-grown turf has been installed at Fenway Park, the White House and the 2004 Athens Olympics. Its 3,300 acres, mostly in South County, account for a substantial chunk of all sod grown in New England. The smallest state ranks 26th in the nation in sod production.

"Sod is the largest single commodity in the state. Its greatest asset, its greatest legacy, is that it has provided economic viability for farms that might have gone out of business," said Michael Sullivan, former director of both the Department of Environmental Management and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service.

However, much of the sod grown in Rhode Island is on some of the best agricultural soils in the state. And most of Rhode Island's sod farms were growing potatoes in the 1950s.

This situation has some, such as Rick Enser, a retired ecologist who worked for the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management for nearly three decades, wondering if it would make more sense for Rhode Island to grow food in the quality soil currently growing turf.

He told ecoRI News the people of Rhode Island “should be appalled that the best soils are not used to grow food, but lawn,” which, he said, has “a biodiversity value just north of an asphalt parking lot.”

But farmers, under pressure to hold onto their land and earn a living, have had to make an economic calculation.

“A good potato crop would bring \$800 per acre, while sod yields \$1,200 to \$1,500 per acre,” he said. “Any businessperson will go where a better profit can be made, especially if they love the life of farming and are fighting to keep the land,” Sullivan said.

DEM Rejection Burns Proposed High-Heat Medical-Waste Facility in West Warwick

Environmental regulators denied a permit for a high-heat medical waste treatment facility following public outcry about potential health and environmental dangers, which led state lawmakers and the governor to take action effectively banning the process within Rhode Island.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) issued a decision July 13 denying an application by MedRecycler Inc. for a facility in West Warwick. The state agency said the ruling was prompted by the passage of a law placing strict and expansive geographic restrictions on medical waste disposal using a high-heat method called pyrolysis.

DEM noted the application’s failure to file specific information, including contingency plans with the West Warwick and East Greenwich fire departments, biological testing protocols and details of a required buffer zone between the facility and adjacent properties.

Gov. Dan McKee signed the law July 9 enacting limits on high-heat medical waste processing facilities in Rhode Island, which DEM cited as influential in its decision to deny MedRecycler’s application.

MedRecycler CEO Nicholas Campanella, who is also chairman of New Jersey-based parent company Sun Pacific Holding Corp., issued a statement following the DEM ruling, saying, in part, “The company will consider all of its legal options, of which there are many.”

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