

Public hearing to focus on Three Bays

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STAFF WRITER

HYANNIS - The time has come to curb nitrogen or get off the pot - literally - experts say.

But before that can be done, the maximum amount of ecologically harmful nitrogen that can be flushed into the Cape's coastal water bodies has to be calculated.

The state Department of Environmental Protection, working in conjunction with the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth's School for Marine Science, has nearly completed that part of the state's estuary restoration plan.

At a public hearing Thursday night, state officials will discuss the Total Maximum Daily Load, or TMDL, of nitrogen that can be safely absorbed into the Three Bays Estuary - the Marstons Mills River Watershed (Cotuit Bay, West Bay and North Bay), which spans from Sandwich south into Osterville.

Excessive amounts of nitrogen, coming mostly from residential septic tanks, is the main culprit behind the foul-smelling algae blooms that are slowly choking the life out of fish and other sea creatures in local bays.

The maximum nitrogen load for the Three Bays Estuary system will serve as a guide for local communities in implementing comprehensive wastewater management plans, state environmental spokesman Ed Coletta said yesterday.

Thursday's hearing will focus on the recently released draft of the Three Bays TMDL report, which calls for better treatment and handling of wastewater, especially in ecologically sensitive coastal areas, he said.

The public comment deadline is 5 p.m. Feb. 9.

Peggy Rowland, outreach and development director for Three Bays Preservation Inc., an Osterville-based nonprofit organization, says the maximum daily load is a critical tool in determining Barnstable's future in dealing with wastewater.

"The report says that 85 percent of the controllable (nitrogen) load is coming from septic tanks," Rowland said, noting that standard septic systems don't remove nitrogen.

Of major concern, Rowland added, is that the cost of developing the necessary wastewater treatment and sewer facilities is staggering.

The cost of expanding the wastewater treatment facility in Hyannis alone is estimated to be about \$165 million.

"That's why we're trying to encourage politicians of all levels to come out for the meeting because it's going to take funding from all levels," Rowland said.

Once the maximum amounts are finalized, she added, "The big questions are: What are the next steps? How are we going to raise the money and establish some accountability?"

"It's a scary prospect for people who live around here because it's one more expense they can't absorb."

Written comments can be submitted to Michael Ackerman, Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Watershed Management, 627 Main St., Second Floor, Worcester, MA 01608 or via e-mail at michael.ackerman@state.ma.us.

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