

Health of Buzzards Bay declining, experts say

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WAREHAM — The Coalition for Buzzards Bay delivered its report on the state of the bay.

The news wasn't good.

A study in 2003 showed the bay to be in danger and, since then, the waters have only gotten worse, Mark Rasmussen, executive director of the coalition, said at Tuesday night's selectmen meeting.

In a 2007 comprehensive study that evaluates nine indicators of bay health in the areas of pollution, watershed and marine life, Buzzards Bay scored 45 out of 100, down three points since the same study was conducted in 2003.

"If we see this drop every four years, this is not going to be the bay we want," Mr. Rasmussen said.

The main problems with the bay were high levels of nitrogen and low counts of certain marine life, including bay scallops. The two factors go hand in hand, he said, because of the effect of nitrogen on eel grass, which bay

scallops use as a habitat. Rising nitrogen levels — due to agricultural fertilizer and sewage, for example — reduce water clarity, which hinders the growth of eel grass, a flowering plant that needs sun to survive.

"It's sort of like putting your plants in the shade," Mr. Rasmussen said.

Since the 2003 study, the bay has lost 2,000 acres, or about 25 percent, of its eel grass. Bay scallop numbers have consequently dropped to 10 percent of their historic high, severely impacting the fishing industry, he added.

Wareham is in an especially precarious position, as pollutants from neighboring areas flow into the town's waterways.

To make matters worse, A.D. Makepeace is proposing a residential and commercial development in Plymouth that would include more than 1,100 residential units. Any nitrogen runoff will flow directly into Wareham's waters, Mr. Rasmussen said.

Selectmen agreed they should speak up about the negative effects the development would have on Wareham.

"I think we should be a vocal signer" of the opposition to the development, said Selectman Bruce Sauvageau.

Selectman Chairwoman Brenda Eckstrom said the helplessness Wareham residents feel about their ability to reduce nitrogen levels resonated at Town Meeting in October, when they voted down an article that would have established a nitrogen loading standard for wastewater discharges.

The defeat of the article occurred in part because voters wanted other towns to join for a regional effort to reduce nitrogen loading, rather than have Wareham spend money on cleaning up waters that would only be polluted by other towns.

Mrs. Eckstrom said she hopes the towns will come together by next fall to establish a regional standard.

Furthermore, 89 reports sponsored by the Massachusetts Estuaries Project will put a number on how much nitrogen towns should remove from their waters.

Conducted by the Department of Environmental Protection and the School for Marine Science and Technology, Wareham's report, due to the town soon, will quantify what Wareham alone is responsible for in terms of nitrogen reduction.

Mrs. Eckstrom said she believes the report will help make the nitrogen problem more concrete for residents and incite them to action.

"It's one of those issues that people don't see every day," because the damage is insidious.

"People have to realize the long-term effects of it."