

UMass-Dartmouth defends project

By [JOHN HOEY](#)

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Much of the recent criticism of the Massachusetts Estuaries Project, which is managed by UMass-Dartmouth, following a state audit is unfair and has disregarded numerous pertinent facts. For the record, UMass-Dartmouth appreciates the auditor's interest in making the project as effective and efficient as possible, and values the advice that the auditor provided concerning the project.

The MEP, under the direction of the highly respected Brian Howes of our School of Marine Science and Technology, is a model of university-commonwealth collaboration that has saved cities and towns millions of dollars in environmental remediation costs to date and will save tens of millions more over the next five years.

Howes, his staff, students and scientific partners have spent thousands of hours on this project because they want to make a real difference in the quality of life in this region, and they are succeeding.

It is important to note that the issues raised by the auditor are procedural in nature. Neither the quality of the project nor the integrity of any individual has been questioned. The university has accounted for every dollar invested in the project.

Meanwhile, the project was cited in 2007 by the Pioneer Institute for being a successful and innovative model of collaboration. A policy brief released by the Institute stated: The Massachusetts Estuaries Project realizes cost savings from a variety of mechanisms, most notably the utilization of university resources. The project makes an effective application of university resources to meet environmental needs of municipalities and the citizens of Massachusetts. The unique structure of the estuaries project has made it possible to conduct data collection, synthesis, modeling and management planning for less than 25 percent of the cost of analogous private sector projects. From the municipal standpoint, the savings will range between \$25 million to \$35 million over the six-year project.

The audit has, however, improved the management of this project over the last two years. UMass-Dartmouth, taking the advice of the auditor, has made numerous improvements in its contracting processes to strengthen compliance with all applicable laws and regulations. Among the improvements made over the last two years:

- The hiring of a highly experienced research director.
- The hiring of a grants director with accounting experience.
- The hiring of additional grants office staff.
- The implementation of sophisticated grants management software.
- Development of stronger conflict-of-interest procedures.

The university respectfully disagrees with the report's interpretation of the relationship between the MEP's principal investigator (Howes) and the lead scientist at Applied Coastal. We view this relationship as a scientific collaboration common to large research projects rather than a standard contractor/subcontractor relationship that requires the university to seek the lowest bid.

The university, in its proposal to manage the project and in all of its MEP reports, has made clear that

the scientific team must include both scientists for the project to be successful. The two scientists have worked together over many years to create the unique computer model used by the MEP. This model was created long before the MEP began and is owned by the university and the scientists. The scientists' continued collaboration remains critical to the continued success of the MEP. In fact, there would be no project without the leadership of the two scientists.

We are thankful for the broad-based support in the communities it serves.

Cape Cod Commission Executive Director Paul Niedzwiecki has stated: "The Cape Cod Commission is a long-time partner and supporter of the School of Marine Science and Technology at UMass-Dartmouth. The Massachusetts Estuaries Project, which is managed by the university, has successfully partnered and leveraged local, regional, state and federal involvement to provide the fundamental scientific information that is needed to restore the coastal water quality of Cape Cod's embayments. The fact that 10 Cape Cod towns are now engaged in comprehensive wastewater plans is largely due to the partnership and dependable results of the university."

And Mark Rasmussen, executive director of the Coalition for Buzzards Bay, has said: "The science provided by the Massachusetts Estuaries Project is the key to the restoration of Buzzards Bay's more than 30 harbors and coves. This program creates the tool by which communities can effectively control sources of pollution and improve water quality."

This confidence is well-placed.

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