

Water's lots dirtier than water project

By [LINDSEY B. COUNSELL](#)

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and [GEORGE R. HAMPSON](#)

Several press releases about the purported improprieties of the Massachusetts Estuaries Project (MEP) recently flooded just about every newspaper in Southern New England. Such negative press could be devastating not only to MEP and the various towns' water quality monitoring programs, but may have far-reaching impacts to families and the members of the research team that keep these important programs going.

No one argues that the MEP program is not an excellent one, as it serves for the first time ever to investigate and collect detailed water quality data for signs of poor ecological health within each of 89 estuaries in the southeast region of Massachusetts.

More important, the data collected provide guidance toward the best and most economical way to return the waters to the condition they were in years ago. This audit of the program was completed two years ago. The state auditors office and the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth are responsible for working on issues raised in the auditors report, and we will not attempt to address these issues here.

However, recent extensive reporting and editorials regarding these allegations force us to respond to provide another point of view, since we have known and worked with Brian Howes, director of the UMass MEP program, collectively for 28 years.

The framework of MEP began long before it was fashionable to be concerned with pollution of coastal estuaries. The roots of the MEP started in 1987, with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Sea Grant program. David Ross and Howes worked together to create a program to monitor the water quality of the south-facing estuaries in Falmouth and a portion of the waters in Mashpee. Volunteers were selected to assist with sample collection and the water quality protocol and training began. The sampling still continues, and this program was a model for all later monitoring programs. Both men had the vision back then that these estuaries were suffering from declining ecological health.

This same sampling framework and protocol were adopted in 1991 by the Coalition for Buzzards Bay. The "Bay Watchers" expanded their effort manyfold to include 17 towns around Buzzards Bay and involve about 400 volunteers. Howes played a major part in planning and building that program, assigning UMass students to collect the samples and process the data.

In 1997 the UMass School of Marine Science and Technology had just opened, and one of its first tasks was to monitor the long-term impact of nutrient loading in the middle of Buzzards Bay. Nobody realized how gradually the water quality of Buzzards Bay was being compromised more than Howes. His team at the marine science school was alone in this hypothesis based on preliminary data and observation.

New Bedford at the time was mandated by the Environmental Protection Agency to build a new multimillion-dollar sewage treatment system. Most citizens did not want this improved system

because of the tax increases required to pay for it. However, the health of the coastal environment was badly compromised, and so Howes and then-Mayor John Bullard and a few others took exception. Howes' research suggested the city could save \$62 million by not having to create a new offshore discharge pipe extending into the middle of the bay. Reasons for pushing it seaward proved to be a waste of time and money as Howes originally pointed out. The EPA finally agreed to use the inshore site.

This special vision slowly grew to include different monitoring programs on Cape Cod that resulted in the formation of new nonprofits. These programs eventually evolved into the 89-embayment Massachusetts Estuaries Project for Southeastern Massachusetts. Howes was paramount in setting up this program keeping together his research team to take on this new project. The MEP will save communities as much as \$35 million and speed up programs to clean up our waterways.

A track record of unique vision and concern is set in place here; do not base judgments on the perception that Howes is building a personal résumé and individual wealth. He has a genuine caring for the marine environment and its future for the residents of Southeastern Massachusetts.

All these achievements and efforts should not be viewed in a bad light. The university has already implemented the relevant changes recommended in the auditors report. Because of the excellent science, dedication of Howes and his staff and the many volunteers and towns involved and the urgency of the problem, we must move forward. The important point is to resolve any remaining issues regarding the MEP as soon as possible and move on to the more important task of cleaning up an invaluable resource, our coastal embayments.

George R. Hampson of North Falmouth is a senior research associate for School of Marine Science & Technology at UMass-Dartmouth and a volunteer for Falmouth Pondwatchers, Baywatchers-Coalition for Buzzards Bay and Three Bays Preservation. Lindsey B. Counsell of Centerville is executive director of Three Bays Preservation.