

Cameron: Partnering to restore Long Island's water quality

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The return of warm weather prompts many Long Islanders to anticipate summer days enjoying some of our nation's most beautiful beaches, shorelines and waterways here on our Island.

But the mild air also heralds the re-appearance of distressing symptoms of our region's water quality crisis: beach closures, fish kills, brown tides, toxic algal blooms, and others. Some of these events are annual reminders that almost all our water bodies are negatively impacted by pollution from bacteriological and nutrient sources, in particular, nitrogen.

More beaches are closed more often, brown tides emerge earlier in the season, shellfish bans and fish kills are more widespread and toxic algal blooms are turning up in new locations. Water quality reports seem more dire, and higher water temperatures due to climate change have become an ominous factor making conditions worse.

The good news is that hundreds of Long Islanders have pulled together to wage a vigorous and expanding battle to clean up our Island's waters and improve our quality of life. Progress is being made each year.

Under the aegis of the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan, or LINAP, numerous multi-year initiatives are currently underway to decrease the amount of nitrogen, which is contained in human and animal waste and fertilizers, from entering our surface and ground waters.

Another vitally important goal of LINAP is protecting and restoring coastal wetlands, a critical line of defense against potential storms and natural disasters, which in a diminished condition leaves coastal communities more vulnerable to storm surge. Wetlands are also essential components of our marine habitat and reducing our environment's nitrogen and carbon contaminants.

This LINAP partnership, headed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the Long Island Regional Planning Council, also includes Suffolk and Nassau Counties, local governments, area scientists, engineers, environmental and non-governmental organizations, and a cadre of supporting professionals. Together they are implementing a range of programs focusing on technical, management, regulatory and policy actions.

Each year brings more progress in controlling nitrogen pollution here on Long Island, including:

Expanded water quality monitoring in the Western Bays of Nassau County to measure the impacts of two effluent diversion projects, among other infrastructure upgrades and nitrogen reduction initiatives, which will re-route approximately 60 million gallons of wastewater effluent per day per day from local waters to an existing ocean outfall.

Comprehensive new recommendations on proper fertilizer use were just issued providing homeowners, landscapers, golf courses and others with guidelines designed to reduce the amount of nitrogen that either runs off the surface or leaches into groundwater.

A Riverhead golf course has become the first in the region to reuse treated effluent from a nearby sewage treatment plant for irrigation and attenuation of nitrogen.

Voters in Suffolk recently approved new sewer projects that represent the largest expansion of sewers in the County in the past 40 years.

A bioextraction program is underway to identify ways to advance aquaculture that improves water quality by removing nitrogen through the cultivation and harvesting of seaweed and shellfish.

Expansion of financial incentive programs for property owners to install innovative and alternative ("I/A") on-site wastewater systems.

And, many others, including action plans to limit algal blooms, initiatives to study and manage subwatersheds, "roadmaps" to help guide nitrogen mitigation projects through the application process, and biological nutrient removal during wastewater treatment.

LINAP has been described as one of the most significant environmental initiatives in this region since the preservation of the Long Island Pine Barrens. Like that successful initiative, LINAP has also become an important model of how a complex issue of regional importance can be addressed through a comprehensive collaboration of the municipal and private sectors working together to improve the Island's water quality for generations to come.

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