



May 12, 2015

The Honorable Anne M. Gobi, Senate Chair
The Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture
State House, Room 513
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Paul A. Schmid III, House Chair
The Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources, and Agriculture
State House, Room 473F
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Honorable Chairs:

On behalf of the Mystic River Watershed Association, I write in support of S. 433 *An Act promoting awareness for safe recreation in public waterways.*

Since 1972, our organization has worked to transform the Mystic River watershed into a vibrant, healthy and accessible natural environment. Our goal is to clean up the rivers, lakes and streams of this watershed and to connect people with these valuable local resources.

The Mystic River Watershed is impacted by Combined Sewer Overflows at Alewife Brook, the Mystic River and Chelsea Creek. The Massachusetts Water Resources Authority estimates that approximately 90 million gallons of sewage will be released into some part of the watershed each year. This includes approximately 11 million gallons that will be released into Alewife Brook – a tiny stream that flows into the Mystic River. Releases into Alewife Brook have been shown to significantly impact bacteria levels in the Mystic River itself.

In the age of text messaging, Twitter, and periscope, it seems reasonable to request that, when we dump millions of gallons of sewage into a public resource, we provide a measure of self-reporting on the amount of pollution being released. Considering that these releases directly impact public health, 24 hour notice (as instituted by this legislation) seems a lifetime in today's world and the minimum that must be required.

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Timely notification of the public protects the public health by empowering citizens to take precautions and make decisions about how they expose themselves to risk. Whether people are swimming or they are boating, water will get on their hands and either directly or indirectly into their mouths. It is a basic public service to notify people that these water bodies are unsafe for recreation when that is the case. These notifications are essential. There is no question people get sick from these kinds of exposures. The research has been completed. Elevated measures of fecal bacteria in recreational waters make people sick – not everyone, but a good percentage.

Our own organization is working hard to promote safe recreation in the watershed but we need support in this effort. The Mystic River and its tributaries often enjoy excellent water quality conditions for boating. There are however times when water quality is impaired by CSO discharges. Proper notification will allow recreational users to make informed decisions and to stay healthy.

It should be noted that the information needed is, in many cases, already available and simply needs to be properly disseminated. Whenever a CSO event occurs – often times somebody knows almost immediately – whether it is the DPW Director, the City Engineer or a treatment plant operator. They know because this is a serious issue and because conditions are, in many cases, already carefully metered. It is time to ensure all releases are metered and monitored and to make this information available to the public.

We all agree that we no longer want to dump our sewage where we recreate and we are working to resolve that larger issue. In the meantime, let us implement a notification system that allows for safe use of our rivers, lakes and streams.

This bill advances public awareness, education, and monitoring on the impacts of sewer overflows through basic steps of metering, timely public notification and signage. The costs of implementing these efforts are modest and provide clear public benefit.

We strongly urge passage of this legislation.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on this important issue. If you have any questions or require additional information please contact me at (781) 316-3438 or at EK@mysticriver.org

Sincerely,



EkOngKar Singh Khalsa, Executive Director
Mystic River Watershed Association

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