Why we need to act now to protect Great Bay (Opinion)

April 17, 2011

The Great Bay ecosystem is one of the stunning natural places that New England is known for, and which make our part of the country so special. Great Bay supports local economies, provides fantastic recreation and supreme natural beauty to hundreds of thousands of residents and visitors alike.

Right now, Great Bay needs our help.

In the Great Bay we are witnessing a problem that is occurring in many other places, both in New England and across America. Unchecked pollution threatens to choke the ecological underpinnings of a vibrant resource.

The pollution problem now is uncontrolled nitrogen that feeds more and more plants growing within the bay. All the plants block sunlight needed by other organisms in deeper water. Then, when the plants die and decay, they use too much of the oxygen in the water so that it is unavailable for fish and other living things.

As nitrogen levels have increased in the Great Bay estuary, we are losing eelgrass beds, one of the most highly productive and biologically diverse habitats on earth. Eelgrass beds provide spawning and nursery habitat for many aquatic species — including commercially valuable fish and shellfish.

There is currently a lot of local concern about the EPA's proposal to require municipal water treatment plants in the Great Bay estuary to begin to upgrade their facilities to control nitrogen. Some people are saying there's much left to learn, so we should continue to study the issue. Others say there are too many other sources of nitrogen entering the bay, so we shouldn't start with municipal treatment plants. And, some assert that it's simply too expensive right now for our communities to afford.

We understand these concerns, and why they are being raised. Let me just say: The EPA is not in the business of bankrupting communities, and we're not about to start now.

What is undeniable is that the problem is real. Nitrogen levels have been rising for decades and are causing greater ecological damage every year. It's a problem that won't go away by itself, and we shouldn't let efforts to reduce scientific uncertainty in some areas, get in the way of starting the important work we already know must be done. This problem will keep getting worse if we don't take action.

The fact is, the municipal water treatment plants are not the only source of nitrogen. But they are a significant contributor, and they will need to be addressed as part of whatever becomes the eventual overall solution to this problem.

That's why I decided to act now for Great Bay's future by proposing a new permit limit for Exeter's wastewater treatment plant. We welcome public comment on the permit, and we intend to consider all public input and to deliberate on the permit for several months. Because of the
time needed for planning and designing changes to a treatment plant, actual upgrades to any wastewater plant in the Great Bay watershed is years away. During this time, a solid plan to address the other difficult-to-control sources of nitrogen will need to be developed if we are to succeed in protecting and restoring Great Bay.

If we don't take action collectively and aggressively soon, then our lakes, rivers and bays will continue to degrade, suffering from algae blooms, supporting less life, in turn diminishing our communities, our economy and our quality of life.

Here at the EPA, I welcome the debate. It is entirely appropriate, and indeed is helpful. Finding a solution to the nutrient pollution problem is one of the greatest environmental challenges now facing us. We recognize that Washington can't create a one-size-fit all solution. We also understand that communities and local governments are strapped for funds, and are juggling many competing priorities. However, this problem won't go away by itself — we need to work together and begin to tackle it now if we want to preserve one of New Hampshire's greatest treasures.

Curt Spalding is regional administrator of the EPA's New England office in Boston.

Don't delay nitrogen limit for waste water plants (Opinion)
May 03, 2011

Call it what you will, but the Great Bay Water Quality Coalition is not a champion of water quality, nor is the Great Bay Protection Act legislation being proposed in Washington by one of our state representatives going to protect Great Bay. You can give titles that sound wholesome, righteous and well meaning, but they are what they are: efforts to delay desperately needed action to correct worsening conditions in Great Bay and the rivers that feed it.

These efforts only serve to delay EPA permitting of the area's wastewater treatment facilities, which dump at least one-third of the nitrogen into the Great Bay watershed. The argument that it will not solve the problem, and is too expensive, does not change the reality of what is happening in Great Bay. It does not justify delaying the corrective action that we have the ability to carry out.

Calling the science into question is an absurdity. The science has come from decades of observing and studying other estuary systems that have gone down this path before us. Has anyone heard of Chesapeake Bay? Must we wait until Great Bay also has its own dead zones before action is taken? Does it take a crisis before we take action?

We agree that correcting our wastewater treatment facilities will not correct the entire problem. All of us need to work at reducing the other two-thirds of the nitrogen problem. How and where we build our homes, fertilize our lawns, maintain our septic systems, even how we walk our dogs, will need to be addressed by every citizen to get that part of the problem under control.

Moving backward by blocking EPA permitting, and remembering the state of our waters prior to EPA, brings this Einstein quote to mind, "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."
Great Bay Trout Unlimited urges the citizens of New Hampshire to oppose any delay in EPA permitting of our wastewater treatment facilities.

Mitchell E. Kalter, MD, President, Great Bay Trout Unlimited, Dover

EPA must prove need to spend millions (newspaper editorial)

April 01, 2011

Great Bay is a treasure shared by all Seacoast citizens. We derive value from its natural resources and beauty and our lives are made richer by its contributions to the region's ecological health. It would be hard to find anyone who would disagree that Great Bay and the entire Piscataqua Region Watershed Area need to be protected from pollution and preserved for future generations.

The enormous watershed encompasses 1,086 square miles, including 52 towns in Maine and New Hampshire. According to the Piscataqua Region Estuaries Partnership, about 14 percent of the combined population of New Hampshire and Maine live in the region. The Great Bay estuary and the rivers that feed into it are all threatened by pollution. Nitrogen, bacteria and other toxic contaminants are taking their toll. We can see the damage in loss of eelgrass habitat, declining shellfish populations and in nitrogen-fed algae blooms that deprive the waters of vital oxygen.

This pollution comes from many sources, including runoff from septic systems, lawns excessively fertilized with nitrogen-heavy products (Maine and New Hampshire lawns are not naturally bright green in April), and pollutants carried into watersheds during storms and washed off streets and parking lots. In addition, scientists and regulators suggest about 30 percent of the nitrogen pollution in the Great Bay comes from 18 public wastewater treatment plants.

Most of these plants are under court orders to upgrade and modernize, and all have been waiting to receive guidelines from the federal Environmental Protection Agency regarding acceptable nitrogen levels for treated wastewater. Last week the EPA issued its first permit to the town of Exeter, which has an old wastewater treatment plant on the Squamscott River. The EPA told Exeter it wants no more than 3 milligrams of nitrogen per liter of treated water. It's probably safe to assume all the other communities waiting for EPA permits will be given similar guidelines.

The EPA considers 3 milligrams per liter the "limit of technology," according to Carl DeLoi, of the EPA's office of Ecosystem Protection. "That's the number that can be expected to be reasonably achieved with today's technology."

While building "limit of technology" wastewater systems is certainly in our environmental interests, the cost to local water and sewer ratepayers across the region would be hundreds of millions of dollars. Exeter would be facing an estimated bill of $19.4 million, while Portsmouth would face a cost of between $65 million and $100 million.

It is not only unfair to expect individual ratepayers alone to shoulder this enormous financial burden, but it is also a recipe for disaster. You can't get blood from a stone, and many Seacoast residents are already struggling. To suggest residents can tack on another $1,000 to $2,000 a year in sewer fees is not realistic.
Peter Rice, Portsmouth's city engineer, points out one likely unintended consequence of such a policy would be people moving to towns without public water and sewer, where they would use less expensive but more polluting septic systems. "We do care about the Great Bay, but before you force something on us, take time to make sure your science is correct," Rice said.

Last week, representatives from six communities — Dover, Durham, Exeter, Newmarket, Portsmouth and Rochester — sent a letter to the state's congressional delegation and Gov. John Lynch asking for intervention. "The effect of nitrogen is not well understood and needs to be resolved to ensure limited local resources are properly directed," they wrote. "The coalition is concerned that extensive local resources (several hundred million dollars) will be focused on extreme point source total nitrogen reductions that will not likely result in meaningful ecological improvements because other factors are at play."

We are pleased the state Department of Environmental Services agreed to review the science behind the EPA's nitrogen limit recommendations. That review is scheduled for this summer. Pollution of the watershed is a massive problem created by and affecting the people of two states. The EPA must not be allowed to create devastating financial hardships for a handful of ratepayers in a few cities and towns to make incremental environmental improvements. Local ratepayers will do their fair share, but they'll need help from the state and federal government. A project of this scope and shared responsibility is the reason we have government in the first place. Massive expenditures to upgrade treatment plants should only go forward once the vast majority of people of good faith agree to the science behind the EPA's recommendations.