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Cape Cod Waterways Face Pollution Crisis

Cape Cod Waters in Pollution Crisis









By KATIE ZEZIMA AUGUST 17, 2010







marine life in saltwater ponds and estuaries on Cape Cod, creating an environmental and infrastructure problem that, if left unchecked, will threaten the

shellfishing industry, the tourist economy and the beaches that lure so many summer visitors. More than 60 ponds and estuaries on the cape and a few elsewhere in the region have been choked by algae and seaweed. The culprit is nitrogen, much of it leaching out of septic system wastewater that runs through sandy soil into the

sewers and clustered septic systems. So far, most of the efforts have been to no avail, stifled by disputes over science and over who should pay for such a sprawling and expensive public works project. "This is the biggest environmental issue the cape has ever faced," said Maggie Geist of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod, a nonprofit environmental group. "And

for a long time it's been a hidden problem." A sign on Perch Pond warns of dangers of shellfishing there. ERIK JACOBS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES







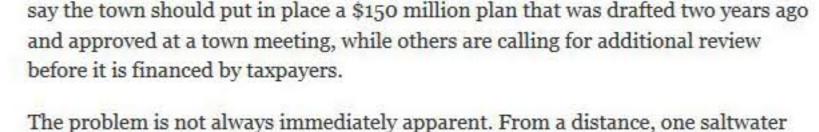




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victim of our own geology." Without remediation, excess nitrogen could decimate shellfish beds and lead to widespread summer fish kills as algae, warm temperatures and cloud cover stifle

overtaken with seaweed that rots in the summer, a blow to property values and an



pond here looks pristine, the summer sun bouncing off its placid waters and boats

Here in Orleans, wastewater has been a divisive subject for years. Some residents

Septic systems deposit wastewater, a mixture of urine and water, into a leach field. Because the cape's soil is so sandy and porous, the wastewater eventually is deposited into bays. Even after septic systems are removed, wastewater already in the soil will still be leaking.

The nitrogen problem is most acute in protected bays and saltwater ponds on the

cape's southern side. The tides coming from Nantucket Sound are not high and

forceful enough to flush out the nitrogen, which causes algae and seaweed to

Griffin Jr., the assistant harbor master. The algae and seaweed kill eelgrass, where prized bay scallops grow. Those scallops are gone from the ponds in Falmouth.

In August, the problem is sometimes smelled before it is seen. The algae bakes

under the hot sun, creating a foul odor that may already be driving tourists away.

Paul Niedzwiecki, the executive director of the Cape Cod Commission, a regional

land use agency, said he had heard anecdotally that some people had left because

"A lawsuit would be intended to bring all of the relevant decision makers and authorities who should be part of the solution to the table," said Christopher Kilian of the Conservation Law Foundation. ADVERTISEMENT

Officials and towns are also girding for the possibility of a lawsuit from an





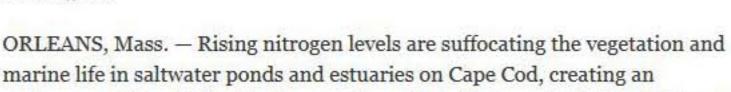
to pay for a plan and others insisting that only households that get sewers pay for them.

determine who will pay for their 50-year, \$650 million plan. The largest project the town has ever undertaken was an \$80 million expansion of its high school.

"This is the most massive potential public works project the town has ever seen, and clearly it's something the town is uneasy about, and it gets challenged," said Peter Boyer, a member of the Falmouth wastewater commission. "It's a classic

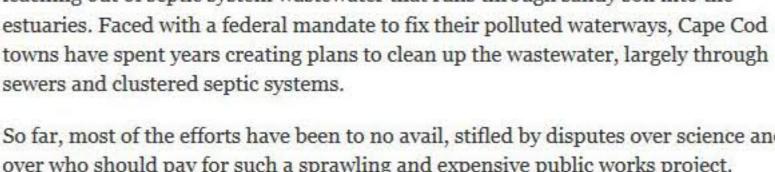
"It's not a question of if, it's a question of when," Ms. McKusick said of fixing the wastewater problem. "And how much blood is on the walls when we're finished."

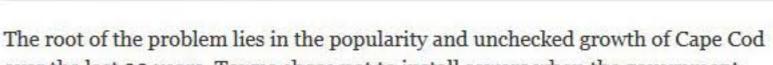
Here in Orleans, Ms. McKusick waded through her pond, slimy seaweed sticking to









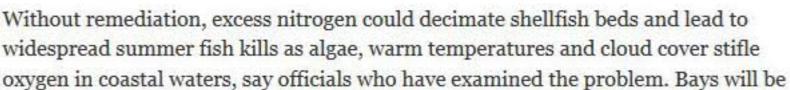


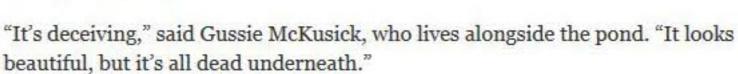




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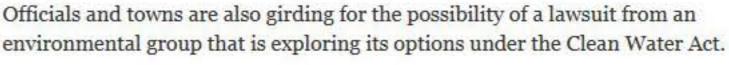




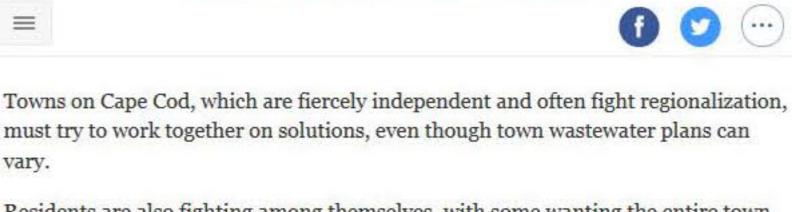
bobbing in the salt breeze.

environmental concern.

flourish, choking out oxygen needed by vegetative and marine species. cioscu io sucinistinig foi years occause of cievateu introgen fevers, saiu nobert



of the smell.



must try to work together on solutions, even though town wastewater plans can vary. Residents are also fighting among themselves, with some wanting the entire town In Barnstable, voters will decide in November whether to finance \$265 million in new sewers with a tax increase. And in Falmouth, officials are still trying to

case, and it's inevitable." her legs and feeling like wet lettuce under her feet.

