

In the Northeast, watersheds, ecology, and environmental challenges cross state lines. For 73 years, Rhode Island has collaborated on clean water issues with other states in the region through its membership to NEIWPCC.

Established in 1947, NEIWPCC [NŪ-Ē-PĪK] is a regional commission that helps the states of the Northeast preserve and advance water quality.

This past year brought new challenges to the country and the entire world—from the impacts of COVID-19, the protests against racial injustice, a contentious election season, to new and growing environmental concerns. But our work did not slow. NEIWPCC doubled down on our commitment to serving our member states, helping them adapt and respond to these challenges.

Whether we are convening water quality professionals or providing them with trainings; supporting research, water resource protection, or education and outreach projects; or representing our states' interests to other regional and national parties; NEIWPCC is dedicated to advancing clean water in the Northeast in collaboration with, and service to, our member states.

Here, we share some of the ways NEIWPCC served Rhode Island and the region during the 2020 fiscal year (Oct. 2019 to Sept. 2020).



PROTECTING THE NARRAGANSETT BAY WATERSHED

About two million people in Rhode Island and Massachusetts are connected through 3,500 miles of rivers and streams that eventually drain into the Narragansett Bay Estuary. Industrial pollution (both current and historical), wastewater treatment plants, and runoff from cities, farms, roads, and lawns all affect water quality in the bay and its watershed.

Since 1985, the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP) has served as a catalyst for scientific inquiry and collective action that restores and protects water quality, wildlife, and quality of life in the region.

The NBEP is a program partner of NEIWPCC. We staff the NBEP and handle contracts, grants, and other fiscal and administrative responsibilities for the program. We're currently helping the NBEP fund 17 research and water resource protection projects, totaling \$525,000.

This year, our staff at the NBEP began a comprehensive, two-year process to update the management plan for the estuary and watershed. They completed a synthesis report about the state of the bay and its watershed that will inform their work.

MONITORING RHODE ISLAND'S LAKES AND STREAMS

A NEIWPCC environmental analyst coordinates Rhode Island's water monitoring programs. These efforts help protect and assess the health of the state's lakes, rivers, and streams.

With a team of employees and interns from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the analyst coordinates activities including water quality sampling, macroinvertebrate and habitat assessments, and invasive species monitoring—with added social distancing

THE CLEAN WATER ISSUES

- Surveillance for COVID-19 in wastewater
- PFAS "forever" chemicals in drinking water and wastewater residuals
- Definition of Waters of the United States and wetlands protections
- Protection for wastewater workers against COVID-19
- Habitat restoration and green infrastructure projects
- Water and wastewater infrastructure improvements
- Water quality monitoring
- Nitrogen and other nutrient pollution
- Underground storage tanks inspections and regulations
- Lead and copper contamination in drinking water
- Aquatic invasive species
- Environmental justice
- Droughts, flooding, sea level rise, and other climate change impacts

and other safety precautions built in this year.

This past summer, the team surveyed 39 distinct lakes and rivers for aquatic invasive species and pulled water chestnuts, a pervasive nuisance species, from five ponds in the state. Throughout the year, the NEIWPCC analyst worked with a contractor to update the database that houses RIDEM's water quality data.

NEIWPCC is also working on a project to develop a new method of assessing the health of slow-moving, wadable streams in Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts, based on the macroinvertebrate species present.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

As a regional commission, one of NEIWPCC's most important roles combines that of facilitator and coordinator, serving the network of water quality professionals working in the Northeast.

We engage and convene these professionals and other stakeholders to collaborate on clean water and environmental science challenges across shared regions, ecosystems, and areas of expertise—through conferences, webinars, meetings of our 19 workgroups, and meetings of our executive committee and commissioners. We also coordinate trainings for state environmental officials, wastewater operators, and others.

As our staff and those of our member states adapted to working remotely and with other COVID-19 restrictions, we also grappled with new clean water issues.

Wastewater treatment plants needed personal protective equipment for their operators, and emergency response plans for staffing shortfalls. As the toilet paper shortage peaked, sewers were clogging with non-flushables. Scientists weren't sure how to safely conduct their spring and summer water quality monitoring, and faced equipment shortages and lab delays. Many state agencies were still conducting environmental permitting on paper, and weren't prepared to continue business electronically. Decades-old citizen science and outreach programs had to be adapted. States started working with universities and private companies to track COVID-19 in wastewater.

NEIWPCC responded to the needs of the states by doing what we do best—helping environmental officials share their experiences and coordinate across state lines.

Our executive committee, comprised of the heads of the water divisions in each of our states' environmental agencies, met every week remotely, responding quickly to new problems.

Some of our workgroups met more frequently. For example, our wastewater residuals workgroup increased their meetings from a few times a year to every other week. In April, more than 40 scientists across the region joined in a call to discuss how they could continue field monitoring that spring and summer.

While NEIWPCC had to cancel, postpone, or make virtual the rest of the conferences and meetings we had planned for the year, we ended up holding more opportunities for the states to meet and collaborate than ever before. In April and May alone, we held 34 conference calls and virtual meetings for the states to work on environmental and public health challenges in the face of COVID-19.

IN NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

More than 140 scientists, environmental officials, and others attended the annual Northeast Aquatic Biologists Conference.

The conference took place in early March and was NEIWPCC's last in-person event of the year. Estuary monitoring, modeling for Clean Water Act assessments, and harmful algal blooms were just a few of the topics presented on during the event.

ENVIRONMENTAL TRAINING

For more than 50 years, NEIWPCC has offered in-person trainings to wastewater operators in the region. Attendees earn training credits to maintain their operator licenses. In March, when COVID-19 necessitated that we cancel the remainder of our in-person classes, we revolutionized our program, quickly pivoting to offer a slate of virtual trainings. NEIWPCC launched its first week of live, remote trainings at the end of May with a two-hour introductory wastewater pumps class, followed by a collection systems 101 training.

We offered two dozen additional live, online classes in spring and summer of 2020. Topics included basic laboratory and math skills, beginner's wastewater operations, brewery wastewater fundamentals, and water quality requirements for treatment plant permits.

NEIWPCC awarded a total of 72 training contact hours to operators in Rhode Island.

We also held 14 training webinars for environmental professionals regionally and nationwide. Topics included PPE safe practices for wastewater operators, underground storage tanks, wetlands, pollutant load limits, and climate change resilience and adaptation for water infrastructure.

REPRESENTING STATE INTERESTS

As a commission serving our member states, NEIWPCC represents a regional perspective on proposed water policies to federal parties such as the EPA or Congress.

This past year, we provided comments on regulatory issues such as wetlands protections, harmful algal blooms, water reuse, lead and copper in drinking water, funding for water and wastewater infrastructure, water quality criteria in lakes, and PPE for wastewater workers.

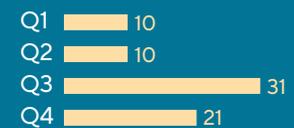
FY2020 BY THE NUMBERS

- 7 member states
- 1, 2 the EPA Regions we work with
- 50 years of the EPA, Earth Day
- 73 years of NEIWPCC
- 72 workgroup meetings for state environmental officials and other water professionals
- 13 comment letters to the EPA, other federal agencies, or Congress
- 72 training contact hours awarded to water professionals in Rhode Island
- 14 training webinars for state environmental officials
- 140 attendees, Northeast Aquatic Biologists conference
- 49 attendees, Northeast Water Quality Standards Training

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETINGS



WORKGROUP MEETINGS:



0.3%

That's how much of NEIWPCC's funding comes from the annual dues paid by our member states: a combined \$160,345 out of the total \$55,472,276 directed to NEIWPCC in fiscal 2020.

Most of our funding comes from Clean Water Act appropriations or through grants and contracts with federal, state, and other entities. But this small contribution makes Rhode Island a member of NEIWPCC's commission, allowing us to do work in Rhode Island and for Rhode Island to collaborate on clean water issues with the other states in the Northeast.

In September, our executive committee and commissioners voted to keep these dues level for the next five years, in anticipation of the burden that COVID-19 will put on state budgets.