

Long Island water quality has hit a low point, environmentalist says

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By Lisa L. Colangelo lisa.colangelo@newsday.com Updated July 20, 2023

Anthony Montefusco, 72, remembers all the years when he would sit at the dock in Patchogue and catch buckets of fish.

"You could see the bottom of the water," Montefusco recalled Thursday as he stood on the dock with several friends including Marty Lange, 86.

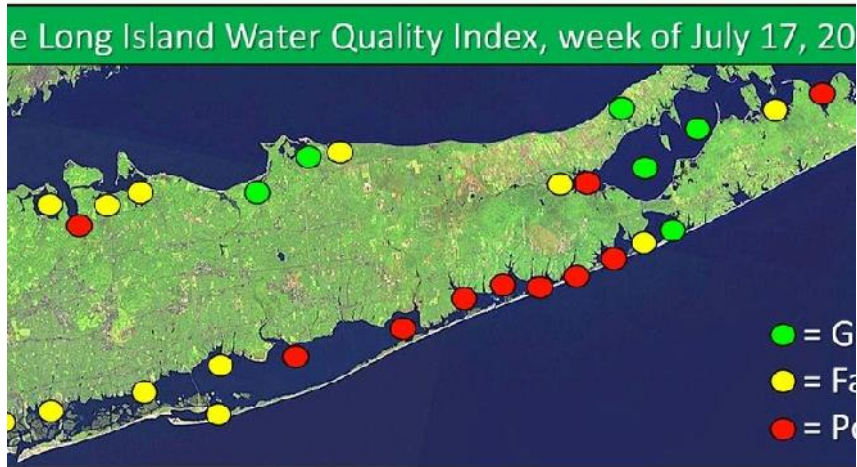
"Now, you can take a bright yellow, a chartreuse piece of line, drop it 2 inches into the water and you can't see the line anymore," Lange said.

Just a few feet away, Christopher Gobler, a professor at Stony Brook University's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, stood with local environmentalists and unveiled troubling data that showed water quality hitting an "all-time low" on Long Island since he started monitoring it about a decade ago.

Gobler, whose Long Island Marine Monitoring Network samples water every week from about 30 spots across Nassau and Suffolk counties, used that designation because only six of those locations had water quality that ranked "good" for the week of July 17. Twelve were ranked "fair" and 11 were ranked "poor."

Of the six that ranked "good," only one monitoring spot, Shinnecock Inlet, met all of the state and federal guidelines for dissolved oxygen, levels of algae, levels of fecal coliform bacteria and water clarity, he said.

Water quality also was ranked "good" in Great Peconic Bay, Little Peconic Bay, Stony Brook Harbor, Port Jefferson Harbor and Mattituck Inlet.



The Long Island Marine Monitoring Network samples water every week from about 30 spots across Nassau and Suffolk counties. Credit: Stony Brook University

Hempstead Harbor and Cold Spring Harbor were ranked "poor," with low water clarity and oxygen levels, as well as elevated levels of coliform bacteria and algal blooms.

The warmer weather, heavy rains and the more stagnant bays and bodies of water that are not refreshed by the ocean are factors. But the main issue is old septic systems, Gobler said.

Monitoring locations that have sewer systems where wastewater is treated had "good" or "fair" rankings.

All seven sites from central Great South Bay through western Shinnecock Bay were ranked "poor."

"As soon as you transition to the areas where people have on-site septic systems that are draining wastewater into our groundwater, which is our drinking water source, and that groundwater discharging into service waters, [that] begins the stretch of the South Shore which is ranked poor," Gobler said.



Christopher Gobler, a professor at Stony Brook University's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, unveiled data that showed water quality hitting an "all time low" on Long Island. Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfost

The result is waterways with so little oxygen and so many algae blooms, both of which cause fish kills, make shellfish toxic and cause other harms to marine life.

Stemming the flow of nitrogen, through sewage treatment or updated septic systems, can help reverse these trends, officials said.

"What we have here is another report telling us again that our water quality is diminishing, harmful algal blooms are up, turtles are washing ashore dead, fish are washing ashore dead," said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Farmingdale-based Citizens Campaign for the Environment. She was there with Gobler, and Kevin McDonald of The Nature Conservancy.

Esposito cited the Suffolk County Water Quality Restoration Act as one solution. It would provide funding to expand sewers and high-tech septic systems. The plan calls for raising the sales tax by .125% to pay for the infrastructure improvements — a measure that would need to go to voters for approval. The county legislature has held hearings on two bills related to the proposal but not yet taken a vote on the plan.

Catherine L. Kling, faculty director of the Cornell Atkinson Center for Sustainability, said the results from the recent water quality monitoring were "discouraging but not surprising."

"While the US has made major strides in reducing water pollution from many industrial sources resulting in some stunning improvements nationwide in water quality, we have failed to do the same with respect to nitrogen and phosphorus, pollutants that come largely from human and animal waste, and agricultural fertilizer runoff," she told Newsday in an email.

Kling said water pollution also has economic impacts such as an increase in prices and loss of jobs due to the loss of bay scallops and other fisheries.

"Economic studies repeatedly find that waterfront homes located near high levels of pollution sell for less than equivalent homes on good quality waters," she said. "All of these economic impacts are merely indicators of the loss in well-being that humans experience when these beautiful waters and their ecosystems are damaged by pollution."

WHAT TO KNOW

- **Monitoring at about 30 sites across Long Island showed** water quality at an "all-time low," officials said Thursday.
- **Nitrogen from wastewater is the main problem**, causing a lack of oxygen in the water and other factors that negatively impact marine life.
- **Installing updated septic systems and connecting to sewer systems** can help reduce nitrogen and improve water quality.



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Lisa joined Newsday as a staff writer in 2019. She previously worked at amNewYork, the New York Daily News and the Asbury Park Press covering politics, government and general assignment.