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The Safety Of Long Island's Water

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Feces. Excrement. Poop. Whatever name you want to call it, Long Islanders are swimming, boating and living among it.

Human waste is polluting the waters off the region's shores, and it has for years. Last year, residents and tourists saw toxic tides, beach closures and a massive loss of wildlife, including hundreds of turtles and tens of thousands of fish. The culprit, [the New York Times reported in June](#), is right in residents' backyards: "Scientists trace the fish carnage to algal blooms fed by elevated levels of nitrogen, which can be attributed in large part to the region's outdated septic tanks and cesspools."

Back then, The Nature Conservancy's Bill Ulfelder warned of the region's fate if the problem was not addressed.

"The place we love will ultimately become unlovable," Ulfelder [told MetroFocus in February](#).

So almost a year later, how have things changes? Ulfelder says [progress is being made, but slowly](#).

"The big thing that happened and actually interestingly enough not long after the interview we did last year, the governor's office started talking to local authorities and put in the state budget \$5 million to work with the local counties and the planning council out there to say, 'How can we create a plan? What can we do to

address this in the long-term?' And that is now being developed," the conservancy's New York executive director said.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo also in September announced \$388 million to expand the region's sewer system, which would reduce the number of septic systems that are contributing to the water contamination.

More than two-thirds of the Long Island's Suffolk County properties aren't connected to a sewer system, Ulfelder said.

"The national average of sewerage versus septic systems is 70-30, but on Long Island, it's reversed. Seventy percent of households and businesses out there have septic systems and cesspools and only 30 percent are sewerage," he said. "And what's happening is the nitrogen is leaking from those septic systems into our ground water and out into our coastal waters and it's having a massive negative effect."

The elevated levels of nitrogen are causing large algae blooms, Ulfelder said, which reduce the oxygen in the water.

"And it reduces life beneath the algae that's blooming at the water's surface and it just makes the whole water experience a negative one for people who want to go the beach for fishing, and wildlife suffer and die," he said.

Additionally, drinking water may also be at risk because it comes from Long Island's ground water.

Ulfelder warns that the problem is more than just an environmental issue, it's an economic dilemma as well.

"I mean this is just a priority for New York because, yes it's about environmental conditions but it's about a way of life out there," he said. "I mean the recreation economy on Long Island is a \$5 billion a year industry. If the water is undrinkable and you can't swim and fish in it, and the wildlife are dying, there's no reason to live out there practically. So this is a huge crisis, but we are now starting to see

steps from the governor, from the local authorities and local communities to address the challenge.”

<http://ht.ly/YrI45>