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Fish, turtle die-offs signal a Long Island crisis

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The photos were stunning. Dead bunker fish by the thousands in the Peconic Estuary, their carcasses massing in the waters and piling onto shores. The culprit, experts say, is excessive nitrogen that fueled the alga blooms, which reduced oxygen in the water to the point that the fish could not survive.

The die-off last week came about a month after some 100 diamondback turtles washed ashore in the same general area. They were killed by a biotoxin produced by a different nitrogen-related algae that was eaten by shellfish, which are part of the turtles' diet.

The twin mass killings scream for urgency in acting on the nitrogen crisis that's killing our waters.

The current state budget contains \$5 million to study the sources and effects of nitrogen contamination and come up with a plan to reverse it. That's good. But that effort is just beginning and studies and plans often get mired in years of bureaucracy and political wrangling. Long Island -- whose waters are the very essence of its identity -- no longer has that time to waste. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and our legislative leaders must give the state Department of Environmental Conservation the resources it needs to do the work as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, homeowners, farmers and golf courses could reduce fertilizer use on their own. Suffolk County is testing high-tech septic systems and working to make them more affordable to homeowners. Riverhead Town is upgrading its sewage treatment plant in the area.

Schools of bunker fish this time of year often are chased by bluefish or other predators into the estuary's shallow waters and deplete oxygen levels on their own. But this die-off was massively larger than what is typical and coincided with a spike in nitrogen in the water.

This is not just a problem. It's an emergency. And that's how we need to respond.

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