



# MASSACHUSETTS Rivers Alliance

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November 24, 2020

The Honorable Karen E. Spilka  
President, Massachusetts State Senate  
24 Beacon Street, Room 332  
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Michael J. Rodrigues  
Chairman, Senate Committee on Ways and Means  
24 Beacon Street, Room 212  
Boston, MA 02133

Dear President Spilka and Chairman Rodrigues,

**We, the undersigned organizations, ask that you support H.4921, *An Act promoting awareness of sewage pollution in public waters*, and ask for its immediate discharge** from the Senate Committee on Ways and Means to the Senate floor with a favorable report. **This legislation, which passed the House unanimously in July, has been several sessions in the making, and it has been fine-tuned over the years, earning widespread support from state legislators, municipal officials, environmental advocates, and constituents.** Given the risk of COVID-19 exposure through sewage that spills into our state's rivers, now is the time to pass this critical legislation to protect the health of residents in the Commonwealth.

**H.4921 will require public notifications whenever there is a sewage spill in a public waterbody, a requirement that Massachusetts is currently lacking.** Every year in Massachusetts, nearly 3 billion gallons of untreated or partially treated sewage is discharged into Massachusetts rivers through combined sewer overflows (CSOs), an infrastructure "shortcut" that contributes significantly to water pollution in our state. **The EPA recommends that the public stay away from water contaminated with sewage for 72 hours, and yet we do not provide Massachusetts residents with the information they need to take this simple safety precaution.**

As residents continue to grapple with COVID-19, many have flocked to the outdoors in unprecedented numbers. New information from the University of Sterling also suggests that sewage releases may actually serve as a pathway for increased exposure to COVID-19. **It is critical that our public spaces remain accessible to all residents during this challenging**

**time in particular, and H.4921 is essential to ensuring that residents can spend time outside on public waterways safely.**

For high-risk populations - children, the elderly, pregnant women - engagement with sewage-contaminated water can cause serious and life-threatening illness. Sewage carries pathogens - bacteria, parasites, and viruses - as well as chemical toxins. These pathogens can cause infections, dysentery, and potentially even cholera. A 2004 EPA estimate concluded that between 1.8 and 3.5 million Americans become sick annually from recreational contact with sewage-contaminated waters. **A 2015 study of Massachusetts hospital admissions published in a journal of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences found that ER visits due to gastrointestinal illnesses for elderly patients typically increase by 32% in affected communities after extreme rain events.**

**H.4921 requires general public notifications after sewage spills, so citizens can make informed decisions about when it is safe to recreate in public waterways. Similar common-sense notification requirements have already been adopted in more than a dozen other states, yet we have failed to make progress on this issue in the Commonwealth. As climate change increases the frequency and intensity of storm events in Massachusetts that exacerbate sewage overflows (both combined sewer overflows and sanitary sewer overflows), we anticipate that the number and impact of sewage overflow events will only grow.**

**Again, this legislation has been several sessions in the making, has been fine-tuned, has passed the House with unanimous support, and has broad support throughout the Commonwealth from city, town, and state elected leaders and environmental advocates.** Further, funding to support CSO public notification systems has been included in previous state bond bills.

On behalf of the citizens we represent and in the interest of protecting the health of all peoples of the Commonwealth, we ask that you act to support the immediate discharge of H.4921 from Senate Ways and Means.

Sincerely,

Katharine Lange, Policy Director  
Massachusetts Rivers Alliance

Andrew Gottlieb, Executive Director  
Association to Preserve Cape Cod

Linda DiAngelo, President  
Back River Watershed Association

Jane Winn, Executive Director  
Berkshire Environmental Action Team

Laura Jasinski, Executive Director  
Charles River Conservancy

Emily Norton, Executive Director  
Charles River Watershed Association

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Connecticut River Conservancy

Heather Govern, Vice President and  
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Nancy Goodman, Vice President of Policy  
Environmental League of Massachusetts

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Environment Massachusetts

Aimee Petras, Program Director  
Farmington River Watershed Association

Alice Arena, President  
Fore River Residents Against the  
Compressor Station

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Wildlife Refuge

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Rui Coelho, President  
Greater Boston Chapter of Trout Unlimited

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Greenbelt, Essex County's Land Trust

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Housatonic Valley Association

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