

**TEXT OF REMARKS BY RICHARD AMPER  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LONG ISLAND PINE BARRENS SOCIETY  
FOR WATER QUALITY TESTIMONY  
NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE PUBLIC HEARING  
SEPTEMBER 12, 2016, LONG ISLAND**

Honorable Members of the New York State Senate and Assembly Committees on Environmental Conservation and Health...

My name is Richard Amper. I am Executive Director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society, a 39 year-old, non-profit, environmental education and advocacy organization.

Without exaggeration, Long Island is facing its greatest environmental and economic challenge ever, in the form of a precipitous decline in the quality of Long Island's drinking water and surface water. Concerning contaminants are showing up in the nation's first, federally-designated Sole Source Aquifer including pesticides, pharmaceuticals and volatile organic compounds.

Of greatest concern is the impact of nitrogen from wastewater and fertilizer. Long Island is drowning in its own sewage. Three million Long Islanders are affected by this groundwater contamination. Government at every level is aware of the catastrophe and the media is covering this crisis on a near-daily basis. Recent polls indicate that concern about declining water quality has eclipsed that of high taxes, for the first time since records on this subject were kept.

Because Long Island's water supply is underground – "out of sight has been out of mind." But now, the consequences of inaction are highly visible in the form of brown tides, red tides, rust tides and on and on – the product of nitrogen-fueled algae blooms that result in massive fish kills, loss of marine grasses, closed beaches and shellfish beds. The situation has reached crisis proportions – and it's getting worse.

Failure to reverse declining water quality will have devastating effects on Long Island's economy. Tourism remains Long Island's number one economic generator. Our bays, beaches and harbors represent an enormous investment in our natural resources. Our capacity to continue to attract the workforce that has always been drawn to Long Island's natural and recreational offerings is now threatened. If the decline in water quality is not reversed, it will adversely impact property values and overall quality-of-life.

Recent polling indicates an increasing concern about declining water quality – including both drinking water and surface waters. While water purveyors continue to maintain that the water they supply to consumers is safe, the public remains concerned -- with nearly two-thirds buying bottled water or water filters for home use. Moreover tens of thousands of Long Islanders continue to obtain the water they drink and cook with, from private wells.

In addition there are nearly 400,000 homes and businesses in Nassau and Suffolk County's using cesspools or septic tanks that discharge wastewater to groundwater with no nitrogen removal capacity. Long Island's dependency on underground aquifers for their drinking water and surface water quality makes it different from the water supply systems of New York City and most of New York State.

The first role of government at every level is public health and safety. It is essential that those of you on the Committees of Health and Environmental Conservation, prioritize and fund the essential endeavor needed for public health and safety – apart from the economy of the entire region.

Federal, state, county and towns have all acknowledged the criticality of this challenge, but the effort to date has not been up to the magnitude of the crisis. From the Governor to the legislature, New York State government has acknowledged Long Island's number one problem and has begun funding initial remediation steps. Governor Cuomo's Rapid Response Team and the State Legislature's creation of the Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan clearly recognize that action is needed. But both executive and legislative branches cannot escape the obvious need for funding sources – not in the millions, but the billions.

Long Islanders with individual septic systems cannot be expected to replace them without government support in the form of direct subsidies, tax credits or tax deductions. Despite paying two-and-a-half times the national average in taxes, Long Islanders have repeatedly supported referenda that have generated nearly three billion dollars for land and water quality protection.

Litigation brought by our Pine Barrens Society will ensure that government will not be able to use money designated by Long Islanders for water protection, for any other purpose without a subsequent referendum. Thus, the key to the necessary lock-box will be held by Long Islanders themselves. But the state legislature must allow Long Island government to let the public decide how to generate the funds needed to restore water quality by authorizing a referendum to be placed on the ballot next year. You must let Long Islanders decide how to clean up their water.

Long Islanders discovered DNA, took the nation to the moon and are already developing and testing nitrogen management technology that can reverse declining water quality and restore this most critical human necessity. We'll need continued funding at the federal, state, county and local level to clean up our water. New York State must respond to Long Island's crisis not with indifference – but with affirmative action.