



**Public Hearing Testimony
of**

**Robert S. DeLuca, President, Group for the East End
Southold, New York**

Before

**The New York State Senate and Assembly Standing Committees on
Environmental Conservation and Health**

Regarding

Water Quality and Contamination

September 12, 2016

**William H. Rogers, Legislative Office Building
Hauppauge, New York**

Introduction:

Good Morning honorable committee members, my name is Bob DeLuca, and I have served as the President of Group for the East End for the last 24 years.

For the record, Group for the East End is a professionally staffed not-for-profit conservation advocacy and education organization founded in Bridgehampton and now headquartered in Southold Town.

Background:

For the last 44 years, we have represented the environmental and community planning interests of over 2,000 member households, individuals and businesses, from the five towns of Eastern Long Island.

A substantial part of our work involves the professional assessment of environmental impacts associated with human settlement and land use, as well as the development of local, regional and state legislation and policy initiatives designed to mitigate environmental harm, protect natural resources, and restore degraded natural systems throughout our region.

For my part, I hold a BS degree in Environmental Science from Fordham University and an MS degree in Environmental Science from the State University of New York's College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

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My entire 33-year professional career has been spent in both the government and non-governmental sectors where I have endeavored to reduce the impact of human activity on the Long Island environment, propose environmental mitigation measures to reduce impacts on the regional environment, and advance a responsible legislative and regulatory framework that is necessary to provide for the best and most sustainable management of Long Island's invaluable natural resources.

Acknowledgement of State Support:

Today, I am extremely thankful to have this opportunity to share my perspective on the state of our East End waters, as well as the critical role that the State of New York must play in helping Long Island and our East End region develop and deploy the most effective and efficient long term strategy for water quality management, protection and restoration.

I will begin my comments with a statement of thanks to you and all your colleagues in both the Senate and Assembly, as well as the Governor, for the improved attention and investment that Long Island's troubled water resources have received over the past few years.

In particular, the State's recent funding increase for the long-struggling Environmental Protection Fund, its commitment to funding the development of a Long Island Nitrogen Action Plan, and its allocation of nearly \$400 million in post-Sandy resiliency and wastewater infrastructure funds, all represent positive and measurable investments in the future of water quality protection in our region.

We are extremely encouraged by these tangible measures and it sends an important policy message that Albany has heard our pleas for help and has been willing to lend its support to the cause of water quality restoration on Long Island.

Need for Continued Action:

The need for these recent and substantial commitments also underscores the fact that it has literally been decades since there has been an Island-wide assessment

and management strategy developed or deployed for water quality protection, and today our drinking water and surface waters are all showing the tragic signs of this long drought of planning and infrastructure investment.

In my comments today I will offer specific recommendations for government partnership, long-term and recurring funding, and civic engagement as workable strategies to help us all achieve the outcomes we need to protect and restore water quality on Long Island and all across the East End.

The East End Economy:

On Eastern Long Island, the water quality is particularly pronounced because our entire regional economy is built upon access to clean water. Moreover, our region is particularly vulnerable to ground and surface water contamination because of its close proximity to the marine environment and the very short and well-documented travel times that bring polluted groundwater in direct and regular contact with our surface waters.

As many of you are aware, Eastern Long Island's multi-billion dollar economy is largely fueled by strong contributions from the second-home, tourism, real estate, recreation, agricultural and maritime sectors. These combined elements create a unique, durable and continuously diversifying blend of traditional agrarian production with more complex real estate and integrated resort and recreation productivity that has proven successful for the region and a substantial and constant revenue generator for the State of New York.

The East End's Water Quality Challenges:

That said, our region also faces a number of unprecedented water quality contamination issues and those issues are rapidly becoming severe enough that they will begin to impact the economic vitality of our region.

Today, we struggle with a variety of water quality contamination problems ranging from legacy industrial solvents and pesticides, to heavy metals associated

with largely unregulated vegetative waste processing operations, and nutrients from agriculture and improperly treated septic wastes.

More specifically, thousands of antiquated cesspools and septic systems currently leach tons of nitrogen into our ground and surface waters every year leading to significant impairment of our coastal estuaries and our local shellfish industry.

Pollution, disease, harmful algal blooms and excess nutrients have combined with climate change to destroy some 80% of our East End eelgrass beds which once served as critical habitat for many coastal species and vital nursery grounds for our once-plentiful and economically valuable bay scallops.

Our East End waters must also contend with the effects of more than 100 pesticide-related compounds that are currently found in our local groundwater, and emerging issues like pharmaceuticals, vegetative processing contamination and newly identified carcinogenic compounds like 1-4 dioxane (found in detergents) whose impacts have just begun to be understood.

And new isolated pollution events keep occurring. In fact, in just the past few weeks, there is new evidence from the Suffolk County Health Department of significant water contamination in private drinking water wells associated with the past use of fire suppression chemicals at a training facility in Westhampton. This is just one example of the kind of legacy contamination that still occurs and remains a threat to the public health of people (often those of the most modest means) living in our region.

That said, the issue of nutrient pollution (primarily but not exclusively in the form of nitrogen) is in all likelihood, our region's most pernicious water quality problem because it is so pervasive and because it has the potential to harm vast swaths of marine habitat that in turn support extensive economic productivity and

durability ranging from real estate and sport fishing, to tourism and fisheries production.

Hope for the Future:

If there is any good news in this troubling assessment it lies in the fact that by large proportions, our region's local elected leadership and citizenry remain among the most environmentally conscious and mobilized in the State of New York, and that consciousness is borne out by the countless local government efforts that have been instituted to try and reduce water pollution and restore degraded waters throughout our region.

As an example, and with the help of those of you in the Legislature who sponsored and supported the initiative, this November, residents in the five East End Towns of Suffolk County will have an opportunity to vote for an extension of the Region's renowned Peconic Bay Region Community Preservation Fund, which will include, for the first time, a specific provision to allow a modest portion of each Town's fund (until now dedicated exclusively for land and historic preservation) to be used for water pollution control projects.

We have every reason to believe that this ballot proposition will be successful as it has been in the past, because the people that live in our region, like all Long Islanders understand implicitly, that the future of our environment is directly related to the future of our economy.

Need for Partnership at Every Level of Government:

However, even with the highest levels of assistance and investment provided by local government, the scientific evidence gathered and assessed over the course of the last decade (by Suffolk County, SUNY Stony Brook, the Nature Conservancy, USGS, and others) makes it absolutely clear that the scale of our nutrient pollution problem will require substantial public investment and cooperation at every single level of government, if we are to overcome the challenges currently presented by our declining water quality on the East End and all across Long Island.

Specific Recommendations for Future Action:

Simply stated, Long Island needs long-term, dedicated revenue from local, state and county sources that is specifically dedicated to implementing the recommendations of the forthcoming, State-initiated, Nitrogen Action Plan and the recently released Suffolk County Comprehensive Water Resources Management Plan. In the absence of a defined, robust and recurring funding stream, we simply cannot realize the full potential of any of the most recent recommendations for what we need to do to clean up our Long Island waters.

This cannot be an acceptable option for our future.

Clean Water Working Group:

Moving forward, we believe it is critically important that the Legislature develop a "Clean Water Working Group for Long Island" that will provide our County and State elected leaders with an organized opportunity to discuss a develop a range of long-term clean water investment strategies on an ongoing basis.

Such dialogue should improve the chances for informed discussion, prioritized and coordinated efforts, collaboration and early agreement on a variety of budget and policy recommendations that could help support the region's ongoing efforts to restore it's water quality.

Civic Engagement:

It is also critically important that Long Island voters be given the opportunity to engage in the clean water investment proposals and decisions that will shape the future of our long-term water quality investment.

Over the years, Long Island voters have demonstrated a keen awareness of environmental issues and consistently voted for targeted public investment that would provide a clean and healthy environment for themselves and their families.

To this end, we recommend that the Legislature work with our County officials to develop clean water investment programs that give the people of Long Island an opportunity to vote for the clean water investment strategies and programs that will drive real change in the years to come.

In our experience, ballot propositions are far more than a vehicle for direct democracy; they are also a vehicle for public awareness, education, civic empowerment and ownership of the outcomes achieved. Moreover, we believe that programs created by the public are more likely to receive higher levels of assessment and oversight and that is critical to the long-term success of our shared goals for clean water.

Conclusion:

In closing, I want each of you to know that over the course of my entire professional career, I have not seen a single environmental problem on Long Island that has simultaneously touched so many communities, and for which the consequences could be so damaging to so many, for so long.

All civilizations need water but here on Long Island the role of water in our daily lives and in our Long Island economy is even more pronounced than it is in some other inland communities. As a result, the protection of both our fragile drinking water reserves and the coastal bays and harbors that these reserves feed, must be a sustaining an urgent priority for those entrusted with our political leadership.

The good news is that we do know how to fix some of the largest water quality problems we have, and there is scientific evidence that our coastal waters can recover from even the severe stress they are now experiencing, but time is not on our side and we must get together and get moving.

I thank you for your time and your attention, and remain available if I can provide you with any information or reply to any questions you may have.

Thank you.

Submitted by:



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