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**For Immediate Release:**

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**National EPA Program Celebrates 20 Years of Protecting Coastal Watersheds**

On February 4, 2007, striped bass, ospreys, horseshoe crabs, oysters, and other estuarine creatures have a reason to celebrate because it is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) National Estuary Program which has supported water quality protection efforts through 28 watershed-based programs nationwide, including the New Hampshire Estuaries Project (NHEP).

The National Estuary Program was established through the Water Quality Act of 1987 in response to increasing beach closures, fish kills, contaminated shellfish beds, and a general deterioration of coastal environments. The National Estuary Program was intended to identify nationally significant estuaries in need of restoration and protection. Congress charged EPA to provide technical and financial assistance, management guidance, and the organizational vehicle to foster local stakeholder partnerships to address estuarine health. EPA has designated 28 different estuary programs as part of the national program.

The NHEP was accepted into the National Estuary Program in 1995 and spent its early years developing its comprehensive Management Plan. Through an agreement with the University of New Hampshire, the EPA awards the NHEP approximately \$500,000 per year to implement its Management Plan that is designed to protect, enhance, and monitor the environmental quality of the state's estuaries.

NHEP Director Jennifer Hunter is impressed with EPA's commitment to local control of resource management decisions. "We have a 27-member Management Committee and four advisory teams, who represent the interests of federal, state, and local governments, as well as non-profit environmental groups, business interests, and citizens concerned with the environmental health of New Hampshire's two primary estuaries: Hampton-Seabrook Harbor and Great Bay. This large group of local stakeholders sets program priorities and ensures that resources are put to the best use to meet our management goals." Some programs supported by the NHEP include shellfish restoration, land protection, stormwater management, and perhaps most importantly, a comprehensive monitoring program for New Hampshire's coastal watershed. Hunter notes, "Without a long-term monitoring program in place, no one can know if water quality protection efforts are actually working."

Recently, the NHEP published its *State of the Estuaries Report* that summarizes twelve key indicators that report on the health and environmental quality of New Hampshire's estuaries. The report's findings suggest that the environmental quality of the state's estuaries is good compared with estuaries across the country. However, there are areas of concern such as historically low oyster population levels, increasing nitrogen concentrations in Great Bay, and sprawling development patterns that each year add an additional 1,185 acres of impervious surfaces, such as parking lots, buildings, and roads, to the coastal watershed. Impervious surfaces result in more stormwater runoff, less rainwater filtering into the ground, and more pollutants entering waterways. By providing technical resources and assistance to communities, the NHEP and its many partners hope to reverse this trend and to minimize the impacts of development on water quality.

Suzanne Schwartz, EPA's Oceans and Coastal Protection Division Director, notes that "EPA is excited to be celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its coastal partnership program, the National Estuary Program. It is a leading model for watershed-based management nationwide. It has served as an effective catalyst for producing environmental results at the local level, helping community stakeholders identify, develop, and carry out solutions to local environmental problems. Nationwide, this has meant protecting or restoring over 1 million acres of estuarine habitat."

For information on the NHEP, go to [www.nhep.unh.edu](http://www.nhep.unh.edu).

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