

Senate Environment and Public Works Committee

Jonathan Stone, Executive Director

Testimony on Marine Debris

Thank you, Senator Whitehouse and members of the Committee for the invitation to testify at this important hearing.

My name is Jonathan Stone. I am the Executive Director of Save The Bay, located in Providence, Rhode Island. Save The Bay was founded in 1970 and is the largest environmental group in Rhode Island. Our Mission is to protect and improve Narragansett Bay.

The Bay is the largest estuary in New England and has been designated by the Federal Government as an estuary of national significance. Like most other estuaries along the east coast, Narragansett Bay is an important recreational and commercial resource for millions of people. It is also an important natural resource and habitat for commercial and recreational fisheries, hundreds of species of birds, marine mammals, shellfish, and other marine animals. More than 2 million people live in the 1600 square mile Narragansett Bay watershed. More than 90% of Rhode Island's population lives within 10 miles of the coast.

Marine debris is a significant pollution problem in Narragansett Bay and along Rhode Island's south coast.

In September each year we participate in the Ocean Conservancy's International Coastal Cleanup. Last year on a single weekend, 2199 volunteers collected 19,469 lbs of trash and debris along 65 miles of coastline. Every year, we remove many different types of trash and debris— everything from derelict fishing gear and tires, to tens of thousands of plastic cigarette butts and beverage containers, to food wrappers and packaging. Most insidious and disturbing is the rapid accumulation of thousands upon thousands of fragments of plastic waste as it breaks down over time into smaller and smaller particles.

Marine debris is a human health and safety hazard. It degrades Rhode Island's iconic beaches and coastline, which attract millions of visitors each year and drive economic activity. And, it harms animal species that inhabit the Bay. It has been observed that nesting osprey chicks suffocate when they get tangled in fishing line that the parent osprey used to construct the nest. Small bits of plastic are ingested by fish and birds. And important coastal habitats are damaged by plastic debris.

Most disturbing of all, marine debris is a chronic problem. In Rhode Island, specifically, we know that marine debris is caused by two things: illegal dumping and littering; and polluted stormwater run-off.

The solution to the stormwater problem is to capture run-off in order to filter and clean it before it reaches waterways, the Bay and the coast. This requires investments and ongoing maintenance in stormwater infrastructure. The Federal Government, through the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency, plays an important role in encouraging states to development stormwater management programs; and assisting states in the design, construction and maintenance of stormwater infrastructure.

Our experience in RI is that stormwater improvements have additional benefits that go far beyond marine debris, including reducing beach closures due to bacterial contamination; protecting drinking water supplies; reducing localized flooding; and, making neighborhoods more pleasant and livable.

Thank you for your attention to this important topic.