

# Norwalk River water-testing program saved

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NORWALK -- Despite state funding cuts, water-quality testing of the Norwalk River will continue after Wilton town officials approved \$12,000 for the volunteer-run program.

The Harbor Watch/River Watch program collects water samples at 10 sites along the Norwalk River's 19-mile course to detect pollution levels.

The program was in jeopardy after the state Department of Environmental Protection cut \$20,000 for testing the samples.

The program was saved earlier this month after the Wilton Conservation Commission granted it \$12,000 and another \$9,000 was raised from environmental groups and private donors.

"Now we can go back for a full season of monitoring," said Dick Harris, director of Harbor Watch/River Watch.

The Wilton funding was designated for a program monitoring wells and surface water but had not been used this year mainly because it duplicated the Harbor Watch effort, said Patricia Sesto, Wilton's director of environmental affairs.

"When we lost (the Harbor Watch) funding, it made sense to keep the program going because, in essence, it is the program that (Wilton) had going until it stopped," Sesto said.

Harbor Watch has tested the Norwalk River for bacteria for nearly 20 years. The DEP funded the program, which relies on high school students and seniors to volunteer, for six years, but it recently stopped because the effort has provided enough data for the state to set new limits on pollution entering the river.

The state's proposed pollution limits -- called a total maximum daily load -- are to be released this month.

Harbor Watch received \$20,000 from the DEP but must use it to monitor the Saugatuck River in Westport.

But since Harbor Watch recently found exceedingly high levels of bacteria in the Norwalk River, environmentalists were concerned the effort would subside when state funding dried up.

"I think it's sad the DEP did not come forth to continue a program they started in a timely manner, but I think it's wonderful that Wilton found the funding to ensure there will be no break in the data," said Lillian Willis, a co-vice president of the nonprofit Norwalk River Watershed Association.

A DEP official has said the grant program that funded Harbor Watch's testing does not extend to efforts

that monitor rivers for which pollution limits have been set.

Last year, Harbor Watch, which analyzes river samples in a state-certified laboratory in Earthplace, the nature education facility in Westport, found the average concentration of the bacteria E. coli exceeded state guidelines at all of the 10 sites the group monitors.

The Norwalk River begins in a swamp in Ridgefield and drains into Norwalk Harbor. Its watershed covers 40,000 square miles and seven municipalities in Connecticut and New York.

Almost half of Norwalk, which sponsors summer interns of Harbor Watch, is in the watershed while 90 percent of Wilton is in it.

The Norwalk River Watershed Association donated \$2,000 to Harbor Watch; Trout Unlimited, \$2,000; King Industries, of Norwalk, \$2,000; and the Frank J. Scallon Foundation, \$3,000.

"We've been long supporters of everything that goes on with the Norwalk River," said Robert Burk, marketing and communications manager of King Industries, which makes chemical additives used in paints, coatings and industrial lubricants.

King Industries, located on the riverfront since 1933, participated in a city pollution-abatement committee before the state's Coastal Area Management plan was created in 1979.

"Most of the problems today are a result of runoff into street sewers," Burk said. "It's more a question of runoff upriver as opposed to single sources."

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