

NO DISCHARGE AREAS (NDAs): ELIMINATING THE LAST MAJOR SOURCES OF SEWAGE DURING DRY WEATHER

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A No Discharge Area (NDA) is a federally approved state designation for a water body that prohibits the discharge of all sewage – treated or untreated – from any vessel. Under Section 312 (f) (3) of the Clean Water Act, a state can petition the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to approve a NDA designation for some or all of its waters. EPA's primary responsibility is to determine whether adequate facilities for the safe and sanitary removal and treatment of sewage from all vessels utilizing the proposed NDA are reasonably available. This designation provides an added layer of water quality protection because it is already illegal to discharge untreated sewage in the US waters.

Boats equipped with toilets are required to have a Coast Guard-approved Marine Sanitation Device (MSD). MSDs are designed to either hold the raw sewage in a holding tank (Type III) or to treat the sewage and discharge this effluent into the coastal waters (Type I and II). A NDA designation is intended to prevent the discharge of MSD Types I and II within the designated area. (Discharges from Type III MSDs are already prohibited within state waters). Effluent from properly functioning Type I and II MSDs has bacteria concentrations well above water quality standards set for swimming or shellfish harvesting. If the MSD is not properly maintained or operated, the concentrations may be even higher. Sewage effluent from MSDs degrades water quality by introducing disease-causing microorganisms, nutrients, and chemicals. During dry weather, sewage discharges from vessels often represent the only possible source of sewage that can cause beaches and shellfish beds to be closed.

New England is a national leader in the designation of NDAs for its coastal waters. From 1991 to 2004, EPA and the states made slow but steady progress designating coastal NDAs. At the end of 2004, about 22 percent of the coastline was NDA, including all Rhode Island state waters, some embayments in Massachusetts; and a short stretch of Connecticut's coast. In 2005, EPA took the initiative to accelerate the pace of NDA designations and issued a plan to designate all coastal waters as far east as Mt. Desert Island, Maine. Since then, the amount of coastline covered by the NDA designation has doubled, including all Connecticut coastal waters; all New Hampshire coastal waters; Casco Bay in Maine, and Cape Cod Bay, Boston Harbor, and Salem Sound in Massachusetts. EPA is working aggressively to complete Massachusetts and Maine.

Maintaining pumpout infrastructure, educating boaters and marina operators, and an enforcement strategy are the foundation for the success of any NDA. In fall 2008, an evaluation of the Casco Bay NDA program was performed. The results from this study can be applicable to NDAs in any area – whether one wants to improve an existing program or to establish a new designation.

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