The Promise and the Challenge of Urban Rivers,
New England Urban Rivers Conference, March 29, 2007, Federal Reserve Bank, Boston, MA

Opening Remarks by Robert W. Varney
Regional Administrator, EPA New England

Good morning. It is wonderful to be here today with over 300 people that share EPA's interest in urban rivers. This conference, The Promise and Challenge of Urban Rivers, has been over a year in the making and many talented people have helped to make it happen.

We would like to thank our co-sponsors at the Urban Harbors Institute – Jack Wiggin, Chantal Lefebvre, Pauline Westhaver, and Dennis Lee. A special thanks to Rebecca Winer-Skonovd and Jennifer Zelinski from the Center for Watershed Protection. And, thank you to all the speakers, too numerous to mention by name, that are sharing their knowledge and expertise with all of us today. Lastly, thanks to all the EPA staff that contributed to making this conference a success – Trish Garrigan, Doug Gutro, Johanna Hunter, Gevon Solomon, Robin Fletcher, Frankee Gee, and Lynne Hamjian to name a few.

Urban rivers are the lifeblood of our cities. They are critical to the history, identity, and livelihood of many New England cities. As you can see from today's agenda there are many opportunities and many challenges we face when working to restore urban rivers. Our urban rivers have been degraded over the past two hundred years and the time has come to turn the tides. Urban areas have major environmental problems and vulnerable populations. It is important to work together to restore our urban rivers and to address issues of environmental justice. More and more cities are looking to urban rivers as future assets that will help revitalize our cities, improve the economy, and provide a better quality of life for the people.

Water Quality Accomplishments

In the last few years, we have made great strides in New England to improve water quality, particularly in the permitting and enforcement arena. Here are a few examples.

In the Boston area, last spring, EPA reached a settlement with the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) that requires dramatic reductions of combined sewer overflows (CSO's) to the Charles River. Earlier agreements had already reduced overflow volumes from 1.7 billion gallons in 1988 to roughly 30 million gallons in an average year. The new agreement will require reductions to less than 8 million gallons per year, for a total reduction of more than 99.5% in this widely-used urban river. This follows the U.S. District Court's acceptance of an agreement with the MWRA in 2005 which will virtually eliminate combined sewer overflows to a string of beaches along the South Boston peninsula, which are now closed frequently each summer. MWRA will complete construction of a storage tunnel by 2011 which will prevent these overflows up to the 25-year storm at a cost of about $245 million.

In Cambridge, EPA and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection have issued a final Clean Water Act discharge permit for the Mirant Kendall Station power plant to address potential adverse impacts to sustainable fish populations, aesthetics, and recreation due to heat, excessive algae growth, reduced water clarity and the intake of cooling water.

In Hartford, as a result of EPA and CT DEP enforcement actions, the users of the Metropolitan District's wastewater collection and treatment system passed an $800 million bonding authorization last fall to fund the initial phase of needed corrections and upgrades to the District's wastewater collection systems. This will significantly reduce the amount of raw sewage discharges and upgrade the wastewater treatment plant.

In Manchester, NH, EPA worked with the NH Department of Environmental Services, and the City of Manchester to implement an innovative agreement to spend $52 million to address 26 CSO's, and to spend an additional $5.6 million in "supplemental environmental projects." This resulted in the protection of over 600 acres of rare wetlands in the City as well as other restoration projects.

In Portsmouth, EPA will be requiring secondary treatment at its sewage treatment plant. When completed, the improved discharge – along with the City's on-going efforts to address combined sewer overflows and storm water discharges – will contribute to the attainment of water quality in the Piscataqua River and the Great Bay Estuary.

At Brayton Point, EPA and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts issued a joint Clean Water Act discharge permit requiring an approximately 95% reduction in cooling water use and thermal discharge to protect vital spawning and nursery habitat, in hopes of stimulating recovery of fish populations in Mount Hope Bay.

Last year on the Assabet River, EPA issued four Clean Water Act discharge permits with new phosphorus limits on wastewater discharges from Westborough, Maynard, Hudson, and Marlborough, MA. This is part of a bigger effort to reduce nutrient loadings to our waterways.

This past January, EPA proposed new nutrient limits for phosphorus and nitrogen for the North Attleboro treatment plant which discharges to the Ten Mile River.

Last week, EPA issued a public notice for the discharge from the Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement District facility in Worcester that contains phosphorus and total nitrogen limits of 0.1 mg/l and 5.0 mg/l respectively. Other wastewater treatment plants on the Ten Mile and Blackstone River also will soon receive permits that will require nutrient reductions.

Opening Up River Access

All of this good work and investment in restoring urban rivers matters most if people can enjoy the river and if urban ecosystems are also healthy. All around New England we are seeing great examples of how urban rivers are playing an important role in revitalizing our cities.

In Providence, WaterFire started as a one-time outdoor performance at the confluence of the three rivers that run through downtown. Now its season stretches from May through November and it brings thousands of visitors to the river banks and the city.

On the Woonasquatucket River, more than 50 acres of abandoned waterfront in Providence have been restored and construction has begun on a 5.5-mile bikeway that will link neighborhoods and parks in one of the state's poorest communities.

On the Blackstone River, EPA, the states, and other partners have invested millions of dollars to abate nonpoint sources, create fish passage, and restore important wetland resources.

On the Charles River, many partners are working diligently to implement the MDC Master Plan for the Charles River Basin that includes numerous improvements such as pathways, access points, and expanded parklands along the River.

In Tilton NH, using Brownfields money, EPA and the NH Department of Environmental Services worked with the community to clean up the former Pillsbury Mill site along the Winnipesaukee River. Completed in September, 2006, the site was developed into a scenic riverfront community park that provides access and recreation along the River.

Water Quality Challenges Ahead

Although we have made excellent strides in reducing the major point sources of pollution, we still have big challenges ahead.

Pollution from nonpoint source and storm water run off continues to impair our waterways. We are working closely with the states and local governments to address storm water. We hope that you will get involved in your community in reducing storm water runoff.

Coastal urban rivers have become channels for conveying storm water pollution which contributes to many beach closures. Over the past six years, the number of beaches monitored during the swimming season has doubled from 400 to nearly 800. This expanded monitoring reveals that nearly one hundred of New England's beaches were closed or had advisories for a total of ten or more days over the last three years. Over the next two years, EPA will be working closely with state and local officials toward our goal of eliminating chronic beach closures across New England. We have a handout available that lists the beaches that have had closures over the past three years.

Another challenge we face is in the area of water conservation which is critical to preserving the integrity of our rivers. We need to conserve and reuse water especially during the peak demand, low streamflow summer season by reducing our use of discretionary water for lawn irrigation, washing our cars, filling our pools, etc. We also need to look at low impact development (LID) techniques to recharge storm water to groundwater.

The EPA-funded a $1 million Targeted Watershed Grant for the Ipswich River Restoration Project which is looking at low-impact development and water conservation strategies to reduce severe low-flow problems in the Ipswich River including a low-impact development subdivision, green roofs, permeable pavers and storm water retrofits.

In the years to come, we will need to address climate change as we see more severe flooding and draught.

Measurement of Water Quality

Part of the challenge of restoring a water body is to pinpoint the pollution problems and to measure progress. EPA identified improved water quality monitoring as one of its highest priorities because we recognize the value of monitoring data in guiding efforts to improve the health of New England's waters.

We have recently invested $30,000 for water quality monitoring in Mystic, Neponset and Charles, the 3 major urban rivers in Boston.

There are waters, however, that states and EPA are not able to monitor at all or frequently enough. Here in New England, volunteer groups have played a valuable role in supplementing the available monitoring data.

As part of our effort to reach out to urban communities and watershed groups, we are announcing a second year of our Volunteer Water Monitoring Equipment Loan Program.

Last year, EPA loaned $50,000 dollars worth of monitoring equipment to 22 groups across New England. With this equipment loan program, EPA New England expects to support and enhance the work of existing monitoring groups and assist the start up of new groups who seek to monitor waters for which there is no current data.

This year we will give priority to groups monitoring in urban areas. Tom Faber from EPA's laboratory will be on the afternoon panel to talk to you more about how to apply for an equipment loan.

Conclusion

We hope you will find the presentations, discussions, and tools useful as you continue work to restore urban rivers in your cities. The agenda will tackle numerous interesting topics such as the following:

- What should you do if you are restoring a river and you discover contaminated sediments?
- How can you connect people to urban rivers by opening up more access through trails, parks, boat launches, and swimming?
- What should you do about the daunting storm water challenges?
- How can you find opportunities for urban river restoration?
- How can you measure and show results on your river and use those results to leverage public and private support for restoration?

In closing, each of you should think about ways that we can collaborate in the future. The resources in this room should not be underestimated. We hope that you will network with other communities and groups in your watershed and with the many speakers you meet today. Although this conference is just a small step on our journey to restore urban rivers, the energy in the room today is an inspiration for further action. Thank you for coming and contributing to this effort and we hope that you enjoy the rest of the conference.