

**Participating Organizations**

- Alliance for a Living Ocean
- American Littoral Society
- Arthur Kill Coalition
- Asbury Park Fishing Club
- Atlantic Highlands Arts Council
- Bayside Regional Watershed Council
- Bayside Saltwater Flyrodders
- Belford Seafood Co-op
- Belmar Fishing Club
- Beneath The Sea
- Bergen Save the Watershed Action Network
- Berkeley Shores Homeowners Civic Association
- Cape May Environmental Commission
- Central Jersey Anglers
- Citizens Conservation Council of Ocean County
- Clean Air Campaign, NY
- Clean Water Action
- Coalition Against Toxics
- Coalition for Peace & Justice/Unplug Salem
- Coastal Jersey Parrot Head Club
- Communication Workers of America, Local 1075
- Concerned Businesses of COA
- Concerned Citizens of Bensenville
- Concerned Citizens of COA
- Concerned Citizens of Montauk
- Eastern Monmouth Chamber of Commerce
- Environment NJ
- Fishermen's Conservation Association, NJ Chapter
- Fishermen's Conservation Association, NY Chapter
- Fishermen's Dock Cooperative, Pt. Pleasant
- Food and Water Watch, NJ
- Friends of Island Beach State Park
- Friends of Liberty State Park, NJ
- Friends of the Boardwalk, NY
- Garden Club of Allenhurst
- Garden Club of Bay Head and Mantoloking/Seaweeders
- Garden Club of Brielle/Bayberry
- Garden Club of Englewood
- Garden Club of Fair Haven
- Garden Club of Long Beach Island
- Garden Club of RFD Middletown
- Garden Club of Morristown
- Garden Club of Navesink
- Garden Club of New Jersey
- Garden Club of New Vernon
- Garden Club of Oceanport
- Garden Club of Princeton
- Garden Club of Ridgewood
- Garden Club of Rumson
- Garden Club of Sea Girt/Holly
- Garden Club of Short Hills
- Garden Club of Shrewsbury
- Garden Club of Spring Lake
- Garden Club of Terra Nova
- Garden Club of Washington Valley
- Egg Harbor Watershed Association
- Green Party of Monmouth County
- Green Party of New Jersey
- Highlands Business Partnership
- Hudson River Fishermen's Association
- Jersey Shore Captains Association
- Jersey Shore Parrot Head Club
- Jersey Shore Partnership
- Junior League of Monmouth County
- Keypoint Environmental Commission
- Kiwanis Club of Shadow Lake Village
- Leonardo Party & Pleasure Boat Association
- Mantoloking Environmental Commission
- Marine Trades Association of NJ
- Monmouth Conservation Foundation
- Monmouth County Association of Realtors
- Monmouth County Audubon Society
- National Coalition for Marine Conservation
- Natural Resources Protective Association, NY
- NJ Beach Buggy Association
- NJ Environmental Lobby
- NJ Friends of Clearwater
- NJ Marine Education Association
- Nottingham Hunting & Fishing Club, NJ
- NYC Sea Gypsies
- NY Marine Education Association
- NY/NJ Baykeeper
- Ocean Wreck Divers, NJ
- PaddleOut.org
- Pleasantville Saltwater Sportsmen Club
- Rantan Riverkeeper
- Religious on Water
- Rotary Club of Point Pleasant
- Rotary District #7540—Interact
- Saltwater Anglers of Bergen County
- Sandy Hook Bay Anglers
- Save Barnegat Bay
- Save the Bay, NJ
- SEAS Monmouth
- Shark Research Institute
- Shark River Cleanup Coalition
- Shark River Surf Anglers
- Sierra Club, NJ Shore Chapter
- Sisters of Charity, Maris Stella
- South Monmouth Board of Realtors
- Staten Island Tuna Club
- Strathmere Fishing & Environmental Club
- Sunrise Rod & Gun Club
- Surfers' Environmental Alliance
- Surfrider Foundation, Jersey Shore Chapter
- Surfrider Foundation, South Jersey Chapter
- TACK I, MA
- Unitarian Universalist Congregation/Monm. Cnty.
- United Boatmen of NY/NJ
- Viking Village
- WATERSPIRIT
- Women's Club of Brick Township
- Women's Club of Keypoint
- Women's Club of Long Branch
- Women's Club of Merchantville
- Women's Club of Spring Lake
- Zen Society, NJ



*Ocean Advocacy  
Since 1984*

# Clean Ocean Action

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 Commissioner  
 NJ Department of Health (NJDH)

*Sent VIA EMAIL*

April 16, 2021

Dear Commissioners,

This letter is in response to the extensive fish kill of menhaden occurring in the northern Monmouth County area and primarily in the Navesink and Shrewsbury Rivers, as well as the recent update posted on the [NJDEP Division of Fish and Wildlife](#) webpage.

With all urgency, Clean Ocean Action (COA) is calling for the NJ Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP) and the New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) to host a virtual town hall public meeting to present the latest information on the fish kill and provide an opportunity for questions and answers. In addition, COA urges the Departments to post a web portal consisting of Frequently Asked Questions and additional steps citizens and town officials should take. This should be linked on the NJDEP and NJDOH home pages where it would be easy to find. Further, we want to be sure that the NJDEP and NJDOH have all the necessary resources and funding to investigate, determine the cause, determine the effects, and address public and ecological health concerns. As this may be a long-term issue, additional funding is likely to be needed. Finally, are there resources available to municipalities and counties to manage the accumulating dead fish, in the short and long-term?

There are many questions for the short and long-term impacts, consequences, management and mitigation of this challenge. It is important that the NJDEP and NJDOH provide and share coordinated, consistent factual information. Unfortunately, the lack of detailed science-based information is allowing speculation and misinformation to flourish, which is unhealthy and unhelpful. COA has been getting many calls and emails with photos and videos from concerned citizens who are alarmed and looking for answers. COA is being careful to share only information provided by the NJDEP or other reputable scientific sources to reduce any misconceptions. However, there is growing concern and more information and direction is needed to help citizens and towns safely respond to this fish die-off, especially since it appears from NJDEP researchers it may linger for months.

Since November and December, COA has been receiving reports of dead fish along these Monmouth County shorelines. There have been other reports in the Hackensack River area which were similar. Over the last several weeks, the die-off has increased dramatically and COA has been receiving reports and photos from throughout the Navesink and Shrewsbury River communities, as well as some in the Bayshore. These reports, calls, emails, photos, and videos are being collected and documented by COA as evidence for future research.

COA has been in consultation with NJDEP researchers and welcomes the clarity of the cause of a fish-specific *Vibrio* bacteria that, according to NJDEP, most closely resembles *Vibrio anguillarum*. The cause, extent, and magnitude of the die-off is deeply concerning and raising alarm throughout the region. Feeding the concern is the lack of answers, conflicting answers, and lack of proactive response to the ever-increasing dead fish.

What follows are some of the questions COA has received; we look to NJ's agencies for answers.

#### **ECOLOGICALLY BASED QUESTIONS:**

- When will the bacteria species be confirmed?
- How serious or significant is the ongoing menhaden mortalities due to the vibrio bacterial infection? Have similar menhaden infections been observed in New Jersey, or regionally?
- Why are only menhaden affected? Is there proof that no other species are affected? Can other species who eat the fish be affected (e.g., fish, birds, or mammals)?
- What are the specific plans and time period for the investigations in which the NJDEP refers in the April 16, 2021, NJDEP update?
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- NJDEP Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring: The *Vibrio* control plan for 2020-21 states that procedures for dealing with *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* (*vp*) and *Vibrio vulnificus* have been developed over the past several years through the Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference (ISSC, <http://www.issc.org>) and are part of the National Shellfish Sanitation Program's Guide for the Control of Molluscan Shellfish (NSSP Guide). Will NJDEP address *Vibrio anguillarum* also as menhadens are used as bait fish?
- The 4/16/2021 NJDEP update states that this disease will continue for some time to come. There have been sightings of thousands of sick fish in the last three weeks alone. How long will this outbreak last?

#### **PUBLIC HEALTH QUESTIONS:**

- What can be done about all the dead fish? They do not seem to be decomposing very quickly and not many species are eating them; why not? How long does it take for the rotting numbers of dead fish to completely decompose in the affected waterways? This has become a concern not just for aesthetics but are there specific public/community health impacts that residents should know?
- Should residents worry about eating fish that eat menhaden? For example, NJDEP has recommendations to eat only cooked oysters to mitigate risks from *Vibrio parahaemolyticus* (*vp*) and *Vibrio vulnificus* (*vv*).

- The summer is nearly here, and it will get hot, and fish will rot. As the fish kill continues, will it be safe to carry-on usual summertime activities such as swimming, kayaking, paddle boarding, waterskiing, or fishing and crabbing in the area? The NJDEP update mentions that contact with water in areas where fish die-offs are occurring should be avoided as a precaution. Why and what are the risks involved?
- With the onset of warm weather, the Two Rivers area recently has been experiencing other water quality events such as algal blooms and low oxygen levels in addition to the menhaden kills. Will there be more menhaden mortalities?
- Can the mats of dead fish be collected and removed? Who will clean them up? Are they safe to touch? Can I safely rake them up to collect them? What do I do with them for disposal? The NJDEP update does not recommend specific measures to dispose the dead fish; is NJDEP coordinating disposal efforts at the county/town level since this involves a bacterial infection?
- Who is studying this disease? What is the cause? What is the solution? What does it mean for the future?
- If these die-offs will continue, what can be done? Will there be specific prevention/management efforts? It is not clear if the Departments are working on a multi-tiered approach to investigate this more thoroughly, and plan for further investigation and research.
- Can NJDEP affirm that *Vibrio* populations are not likely related to land-based sources?
- There is a growing number of studies that portend higher vibrio-related illnesses in the marine/human population are more likely due to climate change impacts. Considering that the ongoing menhaden kills started during cold winter conditions unlike warmer summer months, will NJDEP focus efforts on the role of climate change?

Again, COA is urgently calling on the NJDEP and NJDOH to host an open town hall meeting to share what information is available, set-up a statewide question and answer page to inform and update citizens and provide guidance. It is also important to discuss what research is being done or will be done to identify the cause and possible solutions.

The sooner the better. The fish are dying, answers are few, and the heat of the summer is coming.

Sincerely,



Cindy Zipf  
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Clean Ocean Action



Swarna Muthukrishnan  
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Clean Ocean Action

cc: open letter