



# Cesspools in NY state parks to be closed, officials say

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By Joan Gralla

Cesspools in New York State parks, including 36 on Long Island, will be closed by 2019, 14 years after a federal deadline, prosecutors and regulators said Wednesday.

New York State agreed to the closures and a \$150,000 civil penalty in a consent decree filed the same day it was sued by the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District and the Environmental Protection Agency.

“Public parks and water pollution don’t go together,” said EPA Regional Administrator Judith A. Enck.

The state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation now has a total of 54 illegal cesspools.

All should have been shut in 2005 because they violate the Safe Drinking Water Act, Enck and Robert L. Capers, the federal prosecutor, said in a joint statement.

The shutdowns will cost about \$8.8 million; more than \$1 million will be spent on extra steps at seven parks in Suffolk County.

Cesspools leak nitrogen, mainly produced by people, into the groundwater. This has caused toxic algae blooms in Long Island’s waterways since 1985.

Environmentalists blame nitrogen for the Island’s water crisis, especially in Suffolk, where 70 percent of the homes are not tied to sewers.

State parks in Suffolk have all but three of the Island’s banned cesspools.

The parks department said it investigated all its parks in 2013 after the Peconic Baykeeper sued it for violating sewage discharge regulations. Court records show an ongoing lawsuit; another action against Stony Brook University was dismissed.

The parks agency agreed to close only 24 of its 78 cesspools in a 2013 consent decree with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the federal complaint said.

“The United States brought this action to remedy long-standing violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act and to protect New York’s drinking water from harmful nutrient pollution that poses a risk both to public health and the natural environment,” Capers said.

All of the Island state park cesspools sit atop the aquifer. All must be shut in 2018, a year earlier than in the rest of the state.

Only one Nassau park is affected: Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay.

The cesspools also lie in some of Suffolk’s most popular parks: Bayard Cutting Arboretum State Park in Great River, Bethpage State Park, Caleb Smith State Park Preserve in Smithtown, Connetquot River State Park Preserve in North Great River, Hither Hills State Park in Montauk, Montauk Downs State Park, Orient Beach State Park, and the Sag Harbor State Golf Course.

The parks agency said it had earmarked \$15 million to correct the problems.

“State Parks worked aggressively to identify and upgrade outdated septic systems and have already completed upgrades at six state parks,” its statement said.

“There has been no evidence the systems led to any impact on drinking water or the environment,” the agency said.

Some of the extra nitrogen-combatting projects slated for Suffolk state parks include methods used in Europe since the 1990s, the federal complaint said.

Because urine is a primary source of nitrogen, Robert Moses State Park in Babylon, Sunken Meadow State Park in Kings Park, Wildwood State Park in Wading River and Caumsett State Historic Park in Lloyd Harbor, will get “separation systems” so that it is treated, not discharged into the ground.

Connetquot River State Park Preserve and Hallock State Park in Wading River will gain nitrogen-reducing alternative septic systems.

At Captree State Park in Babylon, an artificial wetland will be built, and storm-water systems will be improved.