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New York State Announces Finalization of Owasco Lake Water Quality Plan

'Owasco Watershed Nine Element Plan for Phosphorus Reduction' Lays Foundation for Additional Efforts to Protect and Enhance Owasco Lake Water Quality

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Basil Seggos and New York State Department of State (DOS) Secretary of State Robert Rodriguez today announced the joint approval of the Owasco Lake Watershed Nine Element Plan for Phosphorus Reduction to advance efforts to restore and protect the water quality of Owasco Lake and its watershed. The collaborative effort identified focused strategies to ensure the lake's water supply, aquatic habitat, and recreational uses are protected.

"Understanding Owasco Lake's unique watershed is critical to effective water quality management and improvement," **Commissioner Seggos said.** "We commend the hard work and coordination that went into the development of the Owasco Lake Watershed Nine Element Plan, especially the extra efforts of highly engaged community stakeholders. DEC will continue to assist our state and local partners to ensure the actions outlined in the plan are advanced to help protect this beautiful and important waterbody."

"Clean water is the main ingredient in the recipe for healthy, sustainable communities and ecosystems," **said Secretary of State Robert J. Rodriguez.** "This comprehensive watershed plan creates a clear blueprint for improved water quality and public health that will guide communities in the Owasco Lake area as they protect and restore this most precious natural asset. DOS is proud to collaborate with DEC and our local partners in completing this groundbreaking plan that will pay dividends for years to come."

Owasco Lake experiences [harmful algal blooms \(HABS\)](#) with phosphorus as a key element affecting the growth of aquatic plants, algae, and cyanobacteria. Understanding and managing phosphorus inputs from the lake watershed is essential for protecting Owasco Lake and led to the development of the plan, which is consistent with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's framework for watershed-based plans consisting of [nine key elements](#) (leaves DEC website) for waterbody protection and stakeholder engagement.

The Owasco Lake plan analyzes phosphorus sources and locations, estimates current loadings, and uses mathematical tools to project the consequences of changing conditions. The findings support a series of recommended actions designed to reduce phosphorus inputs. The plan recommends many watershed-level and landscape-specific management actions that can be implemented to meet the total phosphorus reduction target, including agricultural best management practices, sediment and erosion control practices,

installation of riparian forested buffers and septic system improvements. Recommended actions also aim to improve the watershed's ability to withstand and recover from extreme weather events.

The Owasco Nine Element Plan was funded by the State's Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) and administered through DOS Local Waterfront Revitalization Program. The plan development was a collaborative effort led by Cayuga County Department of Planning and Economic Development (CCDP&ED) and Ecologic, LLC. Stakeholder engagement led by CCDP&ED kept citizens apprised of the plan's progress and involved the agricultural community to formulate actions to improve water quality.

Achieving the plan's recommendations will require continued collaboration among the many partners engaged with lake and watershed management issues. The Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council (OLWMC) is the primary entity responsible for coordinating implementation of the recommendations to protect and improve Owasco Lake and will continue to collaborate with the many partners engaged with lake and watershed management issues, including stakeholders from the agricultural community, water supply purveyors, local academic institutions, DEC, DOS, local government, and county and regional agencies. Both quantitative and qualitative metrics will be used to track implementation of the recommended actions.

Town of Owasco Supervisor Ed Wagner said, "As Supervisor for the Town of Owasco, a drinking water supply to over 3,000 people, as well as Chairman of the OLWMC, I am pleased to see the Nine Element Plan finalized. We and our partners have been hard at work for years, which includes the OLWMC Inspection and Protection Division, and have specifically targeted implementing projects that reduce pollution to the lake. This Nine Element Plan provides the additional framework for us to continue and expand our work, and hopefully enable additional funding opportunities."

City of Auburn Mayor Michael D. Quill said, "This is an important step forward in the process to address the health of Owasco Lake. We appreciate the Nine Element Plan's science-based approach to understanding phosphorus contributions to Owasco Lake and the plan will assist all partners to better understand and focus future regulations and corrective actions that we believe will be required in the watershed moving forward. We thank all involved at the state and local level for their important work on compiling this plan and look forward to Governor Hochul's future support with addressing the health of Owasco Lake as we know this Nine Element Plan for Phosphorus Reduction has identified there is much work to do."

Michele Wunderlich, Associate Planner with the CCDP&ED said, "The Owasco Lake Watershed Nine Element Plan for Phosphorus Reduction could not have been developed without the dedicated work of many local partners and stakeholders. We look forward to working with the Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council and the broader community as we implement this plan to protect and care for the lands and water systems within the watershed."

The plan announced today builds upon actions the State has already taken on Owasco Lake to reduce phosphorus and the frequency of HABs, which are a persistent challenge in the Finger Lakes and waterbodies statewide. New York's nation-leading actions to prevent and mitigate these potentially toxic blooms include investing in infrastructure upgrades and new technology, a commitment particularly strong around Owasco Lake.

Based on experiences at Owasco and other critical waterbodies, DEC launched one of the most aggressive plans to combat HABs in the country. In 2018, DEC convened four regional summits to examine the causes

of HABs and develop sustainable solutions to reduce algal blooms. DEC worked with State and local partners to develop and implement HABs Action Plans for 12 high priority waterbodies, including Owasco Lake. To date, New York awarded more than \$324 million in grants for projects designed to reduce the frequency of algal blooms by targeting phosphorus and nitrogen pollution, factors that trigger HAB occurrences.

Among the many environmental victories in the enacted 2022-23 State Budget, Governor Kathy Hochul and legislative leaders increased the EPF to \$400 million, the highest-ever level of funding in the program's history.

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