

Not All Heroes Wear Capes
SNEP is Making Regional Environmental Data Plans

David Morgan

Among the many pressing environmental needs, data management is an unlikely hero. Problems like sea level rise and invasive species more often demand our attention. Quietly, and in the background, environmental data document the long arc of changes in the ecosystems we inhabit and help us take actions to be better stewards. The Southeast New England Program (SNEP) has been working to bring together the region's siloed strategies and disparate datasets. SNEP is working to establish a Regional Monitoring Framework Synthesis to provide a long-term understanding of the health and issues facing the region's ecosystems to support a shared, informed, and coherent approach to environmental management. No cape or spandex suit needed.

Federal, State, and local leaders recognized that Southeast New England's coastal watersheds were heading toward a crisis with diminishing water quality and worsening habitat degradation and loss. Project wish lists had grown long and the timelines for achieving solutions to environmental problems were in doubt. In response, Congress authorized SNEP in 2012 to fund those needed projects, and EPA focused SNEP's initial attention on shovel-ready interventions. The federally funded SNEP has allowed stakeholders in the region to address pressing issues, implement innovative approaches, and with each completed project, accomplish a small piece of the region's recovery.

What has been missing is a regional monitoring approach to let SNEP and its partners more effectively track the environmental health of the SNEP region. While SNEP projects have been successful locally, data on the long-term and regional effects of these projects have been difficult to measure; but this is changing. Over the past few years, SNEP has worked to develop an approach to coordinate long-term monitoring efforts throughout the SNEP region that, ideally, will allow existing regional data, housed across multiple sources, to be comparable. This will enable better support for local Tribal nations, municipalities, and program partners by informing a regional perspective on key environmental indicators and metrics as they change over time. SNEP will report these trends in a State of the Region report every five years, with the first report anticipated in 2025.

One way that SNEP will demonstrate the benefit of concentrated monitoring and implementation efforts is through its inaugural [Pilot Watersheds Initiative \(PWI\)](#). SNEP has awarded \$3 million over five years across four pilot watersheds to focus their resources on addressing common regional environmental challenges in a subwatershed within each SNEP subregion (Narragansett Bay, Buzzards Bay, the Cape, and the Islands). EPA will work with project partners in each pilot watershed to develop a monitoring program and measure their impact over time. Project results will be shared with other communities facing similar issues. It is a model that SNEP aims to replicate.

SNEP's role as a regional convener makes it ideally suited for data coordination and regional environmental indicators reporting. A Regional Monitoring Framework Synthesis is under development to help EPA and its partners assess the combined impacts of future SNEP-funded projects in key water bodies and habitats. In addition to supporting pilot watershed monitoring efforts, SNEP seeks to act as a conduit for regional environmental data collected by numerous monitoring efforts. SNEP is collaborating with its committees, subcommittees, and regional partners to help the Program identify the most useful information to track changes in condition, establish indicators and metrics to be assessed over time, develop monitoring priorities, agree upon common monitoring methods, and develop processes to synthesize available data. The Monitoring subcommittee will play a pivotal role in planning, developing, and reviewing the Program's monitoring and data synthesis strategies; and the

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Ecosystem Services subcommittee will work to translate this data into a cohesive narrative that equally considers environmental indicators and community well-being.

SNEP is making long-term plans for the ecological health of the region, engaging grantees and partners in monitoring and communicating about environmental impacts and the work to remedy them. The Program is working to make regional data more available and comprehensible to SNEP partners and the public; and while the process is ongoing, we understand the importance of getting this right. Data might not seem like the hottest topic, but this unsung hero is moving quickly into the limelight.

For more information on the SNEP Pilot Watersheds Initiative, please register for our upcoming webinar. For questions related to SNEP's regional monitoring strategy, please email us at SECoastalNE@epa.gov