



Great Bay eelgrass disaster: NH's 911 call to action: Whelan

Peter A. Whelan
Guest Columnist
May 6, 2026, 5:01 a.m. ET

The struggle to preserve and restore clean water in the region has spanned decades, marked by ongoing advocacy, scientific studies, and community initiatives. Raising awareness about the deteriorating health of the estuary and the pressing need for sustainable solutions has been a gradual process. Early campaigns faced opposition from local industries and municipalities, but relentless public involvement eventually encouraged a shift toward greater environmental responsibility.

Twenty-one years ago, the author, a charter fisherman, and the Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) united to push for improved water quality in the Piscataqua River and the Great Bay Estuary. At that time, Portsmouth was releasing around 4.8 million gallons of mostly partially treated sewage into the Piscataqua River daily, and during major storms, the volume surged to more than 15 million gallons of untreated sewage. These conditions left the estuary in poor health, with hazardous nitrogen levels jeopardizing the ecosystem. As the largest saltwater estuary north of Chesapeake Bay, Great Bay is a vital nursery for numerous marine species, and the elevated nitrogen threatened its delicate balance.

Improvements prompted by the Clean Water Act

The enactment of the Clean Water Act under the Nixon administration required that the Piscataqua and Great Bay meet certain water quality standards. These standards were the basis of pressure by fisherman and environmental groups which eventually forced change. The building and upgrading of area sewage treatment facilities which adhere to nitrogen limits and other regulations were the result of public pressure. These measures, driven by public outcry, have helped improve the estuary's overall health and contributed to ongoing restoration and protection efforts.

Current challenges and urgent action needed

Recently, a report from the Piscataqua Region Estuaries Partnership (PREP) revealed that 98% of the eelgrass has disappeared from the upper part of the estuary. This alarming finding is a stark warning for scientists, who view eelgrass as an indicator of ecosystem stability. Its loss suggests the estuary's fragile ecosystem is at risk of collapse.

Need a news break? [Check out the all new PLAY hub with puzzles, games and more!](#)

From a fisherman's perspective, Great Bay serves as a nursery for species such as herring, alewives, striped bass, rainbow smelt, horseshoe crabs, and many other marine species. This complex ecosystem also supports a substantial oyster population, both farmed and wild, especially in the upper bay.

The Great Bay is a complex and treasured ecosystem, surrounded by thousands of protected acres thanks to the efforts of individuals and conservation groups. Preserving it is critical for the well-being of future generations.

The Call for Leadership and Cooperation

State and federal political leaders, along with local governments, must confront the troubling news about the estuary and ask difficult questions concerning the recent report from PREP. Addressing this issue requires cooperation among all stakeholders, as the Great Bay is too valuable to risk its collapse. Just as fishermen, residents, and conservationists demanded action more than two decades ago, it is now time to ask the right scientific questions and investigate the causes of this eelgrass decline.

We must continue to invest in safeguarding the waters that make our seacoast a unique and special place to live.

This investigation must focus not only on identifying the sources of nitrogen and other pollutants but also on implementing targeted remediation strategies. Collaboration between scientists, policymakers, and community members is essential to develop solutions that are both effective and sustainable. By fostering open dialogue and sharing expertise, stakeholders can create a comprehensive plan to restore eelgrass and strengthen the estuary's resilience for future generations.

Captain Peter A. Whelan of Portsmouth, New Hampshire is a charter fisherman.

Published:

<https://www.seacoastonline.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2026/05/06/great-bay-eelgrass-disaster-nhs-911-call-to-action-whelan/89941621007/>

